Coil

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Coil

by Allegory_for_Hatred

Summary

Dazai's second year at Hogwarts starts with a bang!

Between Mori's latest orders, Snape's investigation, and media-fire coming from all angles, Dazai certianly has his work cut out for him. But he isn't going down without a fight. With a steadily-growing gang of friends (subordinates!) at his back, Dazai might just stand a chance of making it through his second year alive.

...or maybe not. Honestly, Dazai isn't picky.

Notes

-still a no Harry AU
-not canon compliant or in character.
-no con/crit please.
-feel free to translate/print/etc.

See the end of the work for more notes

Doe and Wolf

Dazai had long since grown used to pain. A dog bite, a bruised cheek, a broken bone... the feeling was familiar enough to him that, often, he didn't even register it. Father's bloody punishments were too common to warrant response these days. And, compared to the burn of overusing No Longer Human, physical pain didn't really stack up.

That was Dazai's excuse, and he was sticking with it.

"Still," Mori said. His gloved hands expertly wrapped a fresh bandage over Dazai's arm. It was already stained red in places. "You had to have noticed that it was infected, Shuuji."

Dazai's lip curled, but not at the rancid stench of yellowing, pus-covered skin. "Don't call me that."

Mori gave the bandage a harsh tug before dropping the boy's wounded arm. It fell into his lap lifelessly "By your name? Don't be foolish. Regardless, didn't you just ignore the infection hoping it would kill you?"

"I like *Dazai* better."

"You can change it when your father finally dies," Mori said, merely raising a brow at Dazai's avoidance of the question. He turned to grab a bottle of disinfectant. Obedient, Dazai propped his right leg up onto the infirmary cot where a long, bleeding gash tore across his skin. "Until then, you're only making more trouble for yourself by using that alias here."

The mention of Father had Dazai stilling, but he easily played it off as readying himself for Mori to clean the cut. It stung, but no more than anything else. He shrugged.

It was always cold in Mori's office. The air held a sort of artificial feeling to it—something sterile and chemical. Dazai thought there must have been windows in the room at one point, but now the office was four cement slabs and a tile floor. The only burst of color in the entire room was the blood-red of Elise's dress where she sat at their feet. Her hand fisted around a red crayon.

Mori caught his eyes, a slim smile across his face. "How did this one happen, *Shuuji?"* He emphasized the name, brandishing it like a weapon. An intrigued glint in his eyes, Mori poked a gloved finger into the cut. Mori was always careful to wear gloves when handling this particular patient.

"I'll kick you," Dazai warned.

Mori withdrew his finger to continue his work, but didn't look sheepish in the slightest.

From the floor, Elise giggled.

Dazai eyed the doctor in distaste for a long moment before responding, "I don't know."

Mori hummed. “You’ve always been a troublesome child. I’m sure you can think of *something* that you’ve done.”

“Not really. I’m perfectly well-behaved.”

A moment of silence passed between the two infirmary inhabitants—a pause to appreciate the sheer absurdity of such a statement.

“A well-behaved boy wouldn’t have let a small cut get infected as a method for suicide.”

Dazai rolled his eyes, then leaned back to give the doctor space to work. The sooner this was over with, the better. He rolled his neck stiffly. “Father is just angry these days. It’s hardly my fault.”

A needle poked into Dazai’s shin, threading a small band across the skin. The wound began to close shut under Mori’s careful ministrations. A bundle of cotton soaked up more blood.

Mori hummed.

Dazai’s eyes narrowed. “Aren’t you supposed to be fixing him? You aren’t a very good doctor.”

Below them, Elise’s drawing suddenly paused.

Mori glanced up, briefly meeting Dazai’s eyes before turning back to the wound. He tied off the stitches with a particularly rough pull. “Your father’s illness is quite complicated.”

Illness was, perhaps, not the right word his father’s situation. The man didn’t cough or wear wounds under his skin. Instead, he raged. It was an illness of the mind only. The boss ranted about nonsense and confused himself over trivial things. It seemed, more often than not, that the boss wasn’t entirely cognizant of his situation. His thoughts jumped from the past to the present so quickly that even Dazai couldn’t make sense of what the man was talking about.

Dazai knew the whole affair was causing a lot of strife within the Port Mafia. Seemingly nonsensical orders from Father—from the *boss*—led to sure-fire disasters. Declarations of war on local gangs came from nowhere, executives were fired and hired at random...

Dazai himself struggled to keep up with the demands of his father’s waning sanity. Violent punishments came and went in waves, seemingly triggered by nothing at all. Quite a few of the fresh wounds on his body were evidence enough of that.

It left him feeling oddly cold. Off-put. Dazai didn’t know what to do with that feeling, so he decided to feel nothing on the subject at all.

“He’s going to destroy the Port Mafia, at this rate,” Dazai sighed, listless. *“Oh well.”*

“Ah,” Mori chuckled as he tossed a bloody cloth into the trash. He gave Dazai’s wrist a light squeeze. A warning. “Please don’t sound so casual about that. You owe the Port Mafia a lot, Shuuji. Shouldn’t you at least be a little concerned about its continued existence?”

Dazai leveled him with a blank look.

Mori patted Dazai's thigh, signaling to the boy that his check-up was finished. He unpeeled the gloves from his fingers with a *snap.*

"If anyone is blasé about Father's consequences on the Port Mafia's future, it's you."
"Hm?"

Dazai crossed his arms over his chest. "You're planning something," he noted, clear disinterest in his voice. "Stop that. Slimy people like you shouldn't be allowed to scheme."

There was only the slightest pause in Mori's breath before he said, "I'm only an underground doctor. I can assure you, I am planning nothing more than keeping the Port Mafia in good health."

"As if I'd believe that."

"Now, now, Shuuji." A hand suddenly dropped onto Dazai's head. He stilled underneath the touch, abruptly finding that both Mori's tone and his own blood had run cold. "You're talking nonsense again."

Nearby, Elise vanished as No Longer Human flared.

Dazai held his tongue. They stood in tense silence for a moment before, finally, Mori laughed. He ruffled Dazai's hair before taking his arm back. Immediately, the young girl clad in red re-manifested. Dazai eyed her presence with distaste.

When Dazai didn't otherwise react except to sit perfectly still, Mori spun in his chair and began organizing his tools. Gauze, needles, and various tinctures were pushed around the table under his hands. A scalpel caught the light. Dazai tracked the movement, eyes narrowing over the medicines. He recognized them each by name, though not through any pleasant circumstance. Quite a few of them had made him sick over the years. And the others made his head feel so dizzyingly light he'd thought he might fly away.

Slowly, Dazai removed his leg from the cot. He let it dangle. Dazai watched Mori's back for a moment. The doctor continued his work unperturbed. Quiet, Dazai's hand unconsciously toyed with the edge of a bandage that wrapped around his wrist three times—evidence of his latest half-hearted suicide attempt.

A vial of anesthetics clinked against Mori's metal tray.

"Speaking of my father..."

"Hm?" Mori didn't turn around.

Dazai's fingers scratched into his wrist. "Has he given permission for me to return to Hogwarts this year?"

There was a slight pause in Mori's ministrations, but he picked them up again just as quickly. "Is that fondness I hear, Shuuji? You know attachments like that have no place within the

Port Mafia."

You're the one who told me to make friends, Dazai thought bitterly. But he held back the remark. Even back then, Dazai had known that Mori's overly-familiar requests held nothing but ill-intent. He had always been slimy and cooing about Dazai's social life, after all. And it reeked of something awful.

Dazai was quick to shake his head, even though he knew Mori was not looking. "I have connections there. Followers, information... It's a waste of your time to not let me pursue this to its end."

"And yet," Mori said, finally shifting around to face his charge again, "I've never seen you care about something before. If not a fondness for Hogwarts and its inhabitants, then what else could motivate the ever-apathetic Boss' son?"

Dazai opened his mouth to argue—a swing of cunning words already on his tongue. Before he could, however, Mori raised a hand. Dazai's mouth snapped shut immediately.

"Don't misunderstand," the doctor said, "I find your enthusiasm adorable."

Dazai's gaze fell to the floor before he could correct himself. When he looked back up, Mori was smiling.

"Your returning to Hogwarts... I'm afraid your father is still rather upset with the fact that I sent you off there last year. He won't agree. You're welcome to ask him yourself, of course." Mori spoke slowly.

Dazai's leg twinged with pain—a memory from his last interaction with his father. "You didn't ask permission last time," Dazai tried. "Just do the same again."

Mori's smile thinned, and warning bells started to ring in Dazai's ears.

"Shuuji, you sound desperate."

Dazai froze. He wanted to argue, but his tongue was suddenly leaden. Cold.

"You know what your father would do if he heard you talking like this." Mori spoke slowly, carefully. He raised a hand. Dazai stiffened, expecting a blow, but Mori's palm merely came to rest on his cheek. The doctor's thumb rubbed nonsensical patterns into his face. Pinching whatever baby-fat remained and smoothing over invisible scars. "Emotions like this aren't very becoming of a mafioso. I would punish you for it if I weren't in such a generous mood."

Dazai nodded jerkily.

He knew that. He knew that. But here he was, spilling out pleas to return to Hogwarts like some pathetic child, anyway. Dazai mentally berated himself for it.

Mori seemed to be able to read his thoughts. He sighed. "Those school children you associated yourself with have been a horrible influence on you. You were much better

behaved when it was just the two of us. And your father," he added, seemingly as an afterthought.

"They're loyal to me," Dazai said by way of explanation. "They took risks for me last year. And followed all my orders."

Mori's nail caught on Dazai's lip, then stayed there, lovingly. "They are," he admitted. There was something almost proud in the underground doctor's tone. It had shivers running up Dazai's spine. "You've done good work with that little gang of yours."
Dazai stared forward, his only movement to blink every few seconds. Mori held him still for a moment longer before finally drawing his hand away. Despite the absence, Dazai still found himself stuck in place.

"Hmm..." Mori hummed. He looked Dazai up and down. "It *would* be a waste of our time to cut ties with the magical community, now that the groundwork has already been laid."

"You have something planned for Hogwarts," Dazai said. "It isn't logical for you to pull out just because—"

"Because you got sentimental? Too attached to those school children?" Mori's voice was as cold as ice, but also somewhat cloying. "Certainly, I wouldn't have to throw this plan away had the key player not gotten emotionally invested in his pawns."

Dazai held the doctor's gaze for as long as he dared. "I'm not attached," he said, keeping any inflection out of his voice. It wasn't a lie—not as far as Dazai was concerned. Still, the words felt like they were choking themselves in his throat.

Mori leaned back into his chair and laced his fingers together into a fold. He watched Dazai with an expression that seemed to read through everything. Dazai projected apathy onto his face. They stared one another down for a long, drawn-out moment. It wasn't until after nearly a full minute had passed that Mori nodded, evidently having seen all that he could.

Whatever that may be.

"I suppose," Mori said, "I could allow you to return to Hogwarts."

Dazai forcefully held himself back from perking up. He bit his lip. "What's the catch?"

Mori flashed his teeth in a too-sharp smile. "You would be acting as an extension of the Port Mafia. As such, I expect that you would behave in a manner more suited to our kind."

Dazai felt himself frowning before he could control his face. "I already do that."

"A mafioso doesn't make friends, they make subordinates," Mori corrected.

"You're the one who told me to make friends in the first place, stupid doctor."

"I had expected you would have enough sense to know where to draw the line," Mori sighed. "Although, admittedly, I did find the idea of you making friends quite adorable..."

Dazai curled his lip when Mori trailed off. He turned to Elise, who was kicking her legs while she drew. She had moved on to the brown crayon now. With a squinted gaze, Dazai recognized himself drawn there in her childish scribbles.

“They *are* my subordinates.” Dazai tore his gaze away from Elise the second she started to draw big, colorful hearts around him. Gross.

“Then you wouldn’t be bothered if one of them died?”

His fingers twitched.

Slowly, Dazai blinked at Mori. The doctor regarded him with a raised brow.

“They’re useful to me,” he said, the words tasting sour on his tongue. “That would be an inconvenience.”

Mori hummed, but he didn’t look convinced. Dazai clawed at his wrist in a way that he hoped was subtle. But judging by Mori’s nonplussed expression, the nervous tic had not escaped his notice. Very little ever did.

“It wouldn’t bother me,” Dazai said.

“Quit bullying him, Rintaro!”

Elise dropped her crayon on the floor—the noise catching both Mori and Dazai’s attention immediately. The clatter-clack sound echoed loudly against the otherwise sterile room. The young girl puffed out her cheeks. As always, she was the picture of stubborn youth. Though Mori’s ability always left Dazai with a deeply uncomfortable feeling, he couldn’t help but be somewhat relieved for her interruption now.

“Aww, but Elise!” Mori cooed. “I’m doing work now, dear. My precious Shuuji is never going to learn how to behave if I don’t teach him now!”

Dazai took the momentary lapse in Mori’s focus to cross his arms, pressing his scratched-at wrists into his chest.

“Hmph!” Elise postured her hands onto her hips. “Shuuji isn’t going to listen to you at all if you’re always bossing him around all the time!”

“Now, now, Elise! If you be quiet for just a little longer, then I’ll buy you all the cakes you want, okay?”

“Well—”

“If you give me a mission,” Dazai cut in, putting an end to their syrup-sweet banter quickly. Every word he spoke was carefully without inflection. “Then I will complete it, no matter the cost. To me or my gang.”

Both Elise and Mori went silent. Dazai was privately grateful, having always found their dynamic disturbing to witness. Slowly, Mori rose back up into his seat from where he had

stooped over Elise.

“Good, good!” Mori clapped, looking pleased with himself. When he stood, Dazai was quick to follow. Dazai didn’t let the pain lancing through his leg slow him. “With that settled: your plane leaves in four days.”

“Four days...” Dazai mumbled.

Ahead of him, Mori made an amused sound.

Dazai felt cold annoyance drop over him as a wet blanket. “You were always planning for me to return to Hogwarts.”

Mori chuckled. “I wondered how long it would take you to ask about returning. I was starting to think I might have to breach the subject myself.” Another, pleased-sounding laugh. “Ah, but you looked so cute getting worked up over getting my permission just now.”

Dazai huffed.

“Classes don’t start for another couple of weeks,” he said, moving on before Mori started cooing at him, “what do you expect me to do until then?”

“I’m sure you can find lodging,” Mori said, brushing him off. “You’re a resourceful boy. In the meantime, don’t you have books you’ll need to be purchasing?”

“That isn’t going to take two weeks, Doc.”

Mori ignored him. “In seven days, I’ve arranged for you to meet with a soon-to-be partner of the Port Mafia. They’ll be waiting for you at Gringotts Bank at nine a.m. sharp. Be sure to make a good first impression.”

Dazai scrunched up his nose. In all the wizarding world, there was only one person Dazai suspected Mori had been in contact with. And that was...

“The Malfoy family.”

Mori nodded assent. “The Malfoy family is, notoriously, always on the side of the winners. And whenever the Malfoys believe in someone, the rest of the powerful magical society is quick to follow. Do you know what that means, Shuuji?”

“It means you want me to schmooze,” Dazai said with no small amount of distaste. He hated politics. *But if it got him back to Hogwarts...*

Dazai shook off the indulgent thought.

“It means,” Mori corrected, “that we need to convince Lucius Malfoy that the Port Mafia is superior to Hogwarts and the Death Eaters. It *means*, you need to prove to him that the Port Mafia is a serious player in this silly little war of theirs.”

“This plan of yours, sending me to Hogwarts—”

“The specific details are none of your concern, currently. Just do as you are told, please.” Mori sighed. He turned his gaze to Elise. Dazai followed, only to see the young girl had forsaken her drawing in favor of tearing the paper labels off her crayons. Red paper confetti bunched up around her dress. “Lucius Malfoy currently considers the Port Mafia a rising contender. Your display with Quirrell last year was impressive, but he requires more of a show before changing his loyalties completely.”

“A show,” Dazai deadpanned.

“During your second year at Hogwarts, I suspect he will attempt to test us—test *you*,” Mori explained. “Failure is not an option.”

Dazai stiffened, entire body going tense. “I won’t fail,” he promised.

“Now,” Mori’s arm swept across Dazai’s vision, and the doctor took a step towards the infirmary door, “why don’t you hurry back to your room? You know the boss doesn’t like you out of your room for so long.”

Dazai nodded. He knew Mori was right, even if doing so would only lead to Dazai more beaten and bruised.

“And remember, *Shuuji*,” Mori wielded Dazai’s first name like a knife, “only the Malfoys are to know of the Port Mafia’s involvement. Let’s keep Hogwarts in the dark for now, shall we? That includes those little friends of yours.”

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The luggage in Dazai’s arms wasn’t heavy, per se, but the rambunctious owl was doing nothing to help him keep his footing. Featherbrain hooted and cooed and flapped around her cage. Dazai wished he could just smother her screams, but knew that Mori wouldn’t be pleased to find he had killed their only method of communication. While Dazai could admit that the owl had her uses, she came with some downfalls as well. For example, the numerous eyes currently staring at him.

Dazai hurried across the streets of London as quickly as he could, eager to get out of sight. The attention burned into his back. He only let out a breath of relief when, at long last, the Leaky Cauldron came into view. Dazai didn’t hesitate to push through the front door and take shelter within.

The Leaky Cauldron—it had been about a year since he had last stepped foot in this place. The first time, Professor Snape had been the one to guide him there. This time, Dazai was without escort. The bar served as a gateway to the magical Diagon Alley, where students could buy their school supplies for the following year at Hogwarts. It was also, Dazai remembered, where he had first encountered Quirrell.

A quick look around now found the bar empty of any mafia-types.

Good, he thought, *I don't need the trouble. Whatever Lucius has planned is bound to take up all my time as is.*

Dazai considered himself lucky to have remembered that the pub doubled as an inn. Not only could the Leaky Cauldron act as his housing for the next two weeks, but it also served as entrance to Diagon Alley when the Malfoy family arrived for their meeting. But most importantly: no one here would give Featherbrain a second thought.

Taking a deep breath, Dazai pushed himself off the door and finally looked around the pub—*really looked*. His eyes automatically searched for exits and possible threats. However given the early time, the pub was mostly empty.

There was only one person in the room: a bald man with an exceptionally wrinkled face. He was cleaning a glass behind the bar. Dazai guessed he must be the Leaky Cauldron's owner.

Dazai clocked two exits, aside from the door he had just walked through. One—the common room broke off into a hallway. Dazai assumed it lead to the inn's lodgings. Two—the empty brick wall beside the bar counter. The second could only be opened with magic and wouldn't provide easy escape in a pinch. Not for *Dazai*, at least.

Satisfied, Dazai pulled his luggage together and dragged himself to the bar.

The man didn't look up at Dazai's approach, continuing to fiddle with his drinks instead.

Dazai set Featherbrain's cage down on the bar top with a raucous *clang!* The owl screeched loudly in protest.

The bartender jumped.

He nearly dropped the glass, but managed to catch it with a wordless levitation spell just in the nick of time. Dazai watched, interested, as the cup floated for a few seconds before slowly returning itself to the counter.

"Oh dear... I didn't see you there, kid!" The man gasped, letting out a shuddering breath. His voice was cracked with age.

Almost immediately upon turning around, the bartender's eyes went wide. He looked Dazai up-and-down, hovering over the bandages on Dazai's wrists and face. Dazai knew he made an odd picture. The butterfly bandage hugging his nose, the patch of gauze that was taped to his cheek. .. His lip was colored red and split. The man's mouth dropped open into a gape. Hurriedly, Dazai put a stop to his worried inquiries with an question of his own:

"How did you do that?"

The bartender blinked, stupefied by the sudden shift. It took a moment before realization lit up in his eyes. "Ah! You mean this," in point, he gave a flick of his wrist. Again, the drink glass floated up into the air for a moment before setting down. "Nonverbal wandless magic,"

he explained, seeming to be preening somewhat, “it’s a very advanced type of magic. You must be a muggleborn, then!”

Advanced, huh? Dazai thought. He shook away the thought—there would be plenty of time to consider that later. “What makes you think so, Sir?”

“Please, just call me Tom,” Tom said. “And any kid in a wizarding family would be able to recognize wandless magic. It’s a respected practice, since it’s near impossible for most wizards to master. Moreover—” he pointed to Dazai’s wounds. “Accidental magic gone wrong? I’ve seen plenty of that in my time! You must be a first year, kid.”

Dazai shook his head. “Second.”

Tom tilted his head. “You’re awful small for a second year. *Ah*—but never mind that! What can I do for you?”

“I need a room,” he said. Dazai gestured at the room-keys hanging behind Tom on the wall. Only three were missing. More than a dozen keys were still available.

Tom nodded, evidently mostly to himself. He turned his back to Dazai briefly to retrieve a key. “Sure, sure. I don’t see your parents—are they still outside?”

“It’s just me,” he said. “I’ll need the room for ten days.”

The clinking sound of keys stopped. Tom looked over his shoulder. There was a single, rusted brass key in his hand—a black '4' written across it. “All alone?”

“That’s right, Sir.” Dazai forced some extra politeness into his voice. Drawing suspicion from Tom would only cause him strife down the line—especially considering that they’d be housemates for the next two weeks. When Tom’s scrunched expression didn’t lessen, Dazai explained, “I actually live in Japan. Commuting back-and-forth between London for school supplies and class wasn’t logical. My father is paying for everything.”

“Oh!” Tom smiled, the relief in his face palpable. He set the key down in front of Dazai. “Well, you tell your pops that I’ll keep good watch of you while you’re here.”

“...I’ll do that.”

Then, Tom drew a piece of paper out from under the bar and leaned over it to write. He started to fill in the form—date, duration of stay, cost... “I didn’t know Hogwarts accepted students from Japan. Don’t you all have your own magic school out there?”

“Sure," Dazai paused to consider, then cheerily told the innkeeper, "I got kicked out for trying to impale myself on a chandelier. Hogwarts is my second pick.”

Tom stared at him, wide-eyed. He let out a weary chuckle. "...interesting sense of humor you got there, kid." He cleared his throat, and when he next spoke he was back to the *accommodating innkeeper* persona. “*Uh*. Whatever the case, you lucked out. Hogwarts is a great school. I bet you'll have a great time there.”

Featherbrain strained through the bars of her cage, trying and failing to snatch the room key. Without looking, Dazai slid it away from the rowdy bird. She let out a morose hoot in response.

Tom watched the exchange with amusement in his eyes.

“We'll see,” Dazai answered. He looked around the room, disinterested. "Does Hogwarts have chandeliers?"

Tom made a strangled noise.

Dazai wondered if anyone could really consider his first year at Hogwarts *enjoyable*. Sure, he’d been able to establish a gang of people he sort of liked and pull a few fun pranks. His newfound freedom had been an interesting experience. But although Dazai took some pleasure in playing around, the fact that Mori orchestrated his every action really dampened the whole year. There was no real freedom with Mori’s strings wrapped around him.

Not that he *wanted* freedom, per say. But maybe he *would*, if he could just try it out for once. He didn’t know. There was a broken mirror, somewhere, that said Dazai couldn’t want anything at all.

Regardless, there was more blood on Dazai's hands now than there had been one year prior.

Tom hummed. His quill scratched over the paper for a moment longer before suddenly pausing. “Name?”

Dazai turned back to him. *“Hm?”*

“I need your full name,” he repeated, giving the feathery quill a wave, “for the inn form. Besides that, we’ll be seeing a lot of each other for the next short while. I ought to know the name of the kid I’m watching over until school starts.”

Dazai resisted the urge to snap about needing a babysitter. Instead, all he said was, “Dazai Osamu,” then, “thank you for having me.”

It was like flipping a switch.

Dazai didn’t even register it at first, so distracted in his own thoughts.

But Tom had gone entirely stock-still. Recognition burst starkly across his face.

Tom choked.

He coughed on a rough throat with enough force that the feather quill fell from his hands. It clattered onto the bar-top.

Immediately, Dazai tensed.

That... wasn’t a normal reaction to a random student’s name.

Tom glanced back up at him, then almost frantically recovered his fallen quill. *"Er*—Dazai Osamu, you say?"

"...Do I know you from somewhere?"

There was a sour pit in Dazai's stomach. He had a bad feeling about this.

Tom blinked. For a moment, his mouth gawped open and closed like a fish before he finally managed to work his next words out. "Not—no. Not... personally. But, well..."

Featherbrain shifted in her cage. Her feathers puffed out, making her appear large and defensive. Silently, Dazai mimicked her. His shoulders pressed back. Like a shutter dropping down, protective.

Tom went deathly pale. He muttered something under his breath that Dazai couldn't make out.

The young mafioso raised a brow.

"That is to say," Tom said, seeming to steel himself, "you're sort of famous, aren't you?"

Dazai blinked once, then twice.

Huh?

The tension melted out of his spine, replaced instead by a cautious curiosity. There were only so many reasons why the name "Dazai Osamu" would be famous in the wizarding world. He didn't like any of them.

At Dazai's expression, Tom hesitantly proceeded to finish penning out the inn form. He glanced up at Dazai once he was finished.

"You really don't know what I'm talking about, do you?"

"I've been out of touch with the magical community since February," Dazai answered, succinct. Guess the ruse about a Japanese magical school was bust, now. "I had to leave Hogwarts early, so—"

—so the story about who killed Quirrell didn't lead back to me.

Dazai stared.

Oh.

Now, judging by Tom's bewildered stare, that was precisely the case.

Dazai felt his eyes narrow instinctively.

That intrusive journalist, Rita Skeeter, must have been the one to do it! Even with Hogwarts fighting to keep his identity from the press, media pressure had won out. Dazai prickled at the

thought of how much attention must be directed at him. Just minutes after coming back into the fray, and Dazai was already under the microscope.

Mori's pleasant smile echoed in his head.

Dazai silently cursed the doctor out. That bastard *definitely* already knew, and hadn't told Dazai on purpose. Mori always *did* love to watch him squirm.

Balking, Tom took a step back. "You, *er*—haven't seen the articles, then?"

"Do you have any on hand?"

It took a second for Tom to recognize what he was asked. Once he did, the barkeep nodded frantically. Hurriedly, he shuffled out from behind the bar. Dazai fell into step behind him, albeit slowly so as to not startle the man. Because it now seemed as though Tom was *afraid* of him—absurd as it may be for a grown adult to balk at the sight of a twelve-year-old.

But certainly, it *was* fear. Dazai was familiar with it. The Port Mafia reeked of fear and superiority always. And with Father's latest turn of health, fear was more-and-more common by the day.

Tom came to a stop beside a newsstand. He pulled off the top paper, skimmed it, then shoved it into Dazai's hands.

Dazai frowned at the rough treatment. Once the paper fell into his hands, the biting tingle of No Longer Human sparked to life. It was gone a second later. Whatever magic the paper was using before was long gone now—probably one of those magical moving photos. Dazai's attention didn't linger on the residual magic long. He unfolded the newspaper.

Immediately, Dazai recognized the publication: The Daily Prophet.

WILL HOGWARTS' MURDEROUS "DEMON STUDENT" CONTINUE HIS REIGN OF TERROR THIS YEAR?

"Demon Student..." Dazai echoed under his breath. *"That's me?"*

The paper's title screamed up at him in all caps. It was the cover story—that wasn't promising for Dazai's desire to stay out of the public's eye. The only saving grace was that the paper didn't seem to have his picture. Instead, the center-photo was of a vague, shadowy figure with a sharp smile and glaring eyes. Dazai squinted down at his supposed-likeness before speed-reading through the article.

"Written by Rita Skeeter..." Dazai huffed out lowly to himself. That figured. But this article had only just been published yesterday. Which meant... "How long has this story been circulating, Tom?"

"Oh," Tom said. At some point, he must have walked around Dazai to take shelter once again behind the bar. Dazai barely spared him a glance before turning back to the paper.

As you all well know, Rita Skeeter had written, *the murderous Slytherin student, Dazai Osamu, holds no qualms about killing his professors in cold blood. What's to stop him from killing again?*

"For a while now, I guess," Tom said. "With classes starting again soon, they've been more frequent. *Um..."*

Blankly, Dazai turned his full focus back onto the bartender. "What?"

"Is it all true? That you killed Professor Quirrell over a bad grade?" The second the words left his mouth, Tom grimaced. He seemed to be deeply regretting the words once he said them.

"Hmm..."

"It is!"

Dazai puffed out a breath. "It's not," he said. "Do you have any more?"

Tom paused. "I... in that stack over there?"

Dazai glanced to the newsstand, then shook his head. "You said that this is only the latest story on me. I want to read the earlier ones, too."

Tom drew in a long breath. He seemed to be readying himself—steeling up against the murderer standing a few feet shorter than him. "Look, I—I don't have the old ones. Sold them. Threw them out. And I'll th-throw you out, too! I won't be having a killer stay with my other clients. It just isn't safe!"

Are your students safe at Hogwarts this year? Not if Dazai Osamu has anything to say about it! Rita signed off with a flourish.

Dazai glowered.

Stalking across the room, he came to a dead stop just on the other side of Tom's bar. The older man paled, but held his ground. With a certain amount of calm finesse, Dazai gently re-folded the newspaper. He set it down on the bar top. "I'm sure your customers appreciate that," Dazai said. "But, *this*," he poked a bandaged finger into the newspaper, stabbing at the word *MURDEROUS* with a little too much force, "isn't at all what happened, Tom. I'm no threat to anyone here."

Except maybe myself, Dazai amended, silent and self-indulgent.

Tom shifted in place, looking from Dazai, to the newspaper, then back again. Dazai thought he didn't look especially convinced.

"You don't have to believe me. Just give me a room."

Tom swallowed, heavy. He glanced at Featherbrain—the owl giving a noisy hoot in response. Finally, he nodded. "...I won't turn down a customer. Not since you're asking nice and paying

up. But if I hear even one complaint—”

“I’ll behave,” Dazai said, bringing his empty hands up beside his head in mime innocence. “Promise.” His fingers splayed. "If I act out, you have my express permission to kill me."

He didn’t look at all content, and stress creased a furrow in Tom’s brow. Though the expression seemed to have shifted away from open hostility or terror. Tom looked deep in thought, and more than a little harried.

Good, Dazai thought. He much preferred Tom’s strained compliance to him sounding the alert bells. The last thing Dazai needed right now was the press swarming his current lodgings. At least, not until he had a little more information to work with.

Dazai snatched the key from the table. He beamed, big and toothy, at Tom. Then, with a grunt, Dazai gathered up all of his belongings. Featherbrain hissed at the rough treatment, but neither Dazai nor Tom made any efforts to soothe the owl.

“Just down here?” Dazai asked, clumsily lugging all his things towards the side-hall.

“Room four,” Tom agreed.

“Thanks,” he said. Searching down the corridor, Dazai was relieved to see a door marked with a golden '4' wasn’t very far. He hurried to it. There was a minor struggle wherein Dazai had to retrieve his room key without dropping Featherbrain, but he managed after a short, trying moment. He let out a breath when the lock finally clicked open.

Just as Dazai was about to drag himself in, Tom cleared his throat.

“It isn’t true?”

Dazai glanced up, blinking at Tom through the metal bars of his owl’s cage. He considered his words. “It was self-defense.” His voice echoed against the cage. “Quirrell wasn’t a good person... *Ah*. But I guess that doesn’t sell as well.”

“...Hmm.”

The fourth room of the Leaky Cauldron inn closed not a second after.

-

“Did you know?”

“Hm?”

“Did you know that the entire wizarding community thinks I’m some kind of serial killer in the making?” Dazai barked into the receiver, annoyance clear in his tone. He already knew

the answer, but he wanted to hear Mori admit to it.

Mori's tinny laugh only irked him further. "I might have had an inkling."

Dazai glowered. With a huff, he fell back against the inn bed. It was stiff and musty, but still more comfortable than some of the other places Dazai had slept. The Port Mafia's kennel was all steel slabs and dog slobber. "You didn't think to tell me?"

"You know it isn't wise to discuss your mission in Hogwarts where word could so easily get back to your father."

"He's barely cognizant these days and you know it. I doubt he's even noticed I'm gone."

At Mori's brief pause, Dazai knew he was right. He sighed. With a yawn, Dazai turned to press the side of his face into the mattress. When the red quilt poked into him, Dazai slowly closed his eyes.

Mori chuckled. "You may be right. Regardless, there's nothing to worry about, Dazai. I'm sure this is something you can use to your advantage. The vast majority of the wizarding community is terrified of this *Demon Student* persona the Daily Prophet has created. Fear is a wonderful motivator, you know."

"Of course I know that." Dazai squeezed his eyes roughly shut. "Quit playing games with me," he grumbled.

He could feel Mori's smile through the phone. It set something roiling in Dazai's stomach. "Your meeting with Lucius is scheduled for three days from now," the doctor calmly reminded him, evidently unwilling to comment directly on Dazai's upset.

"I know."

"Good. I just wanted to make sure you weren't thinking of doing anything stupid."

Dazai blinked his eyes open. A grey wall stared back at him. "Did I sound like I was considering suicide?"

Mori hummed. "You aren't allowed to die quite yet. Try to stay focused." He took a breath. "Although I was more thinking—the last time I let you wander off on your own at Hogwarts, you came back awfully sentimental. I was hoping to remind you that business with the Malfoys comes before playing house with that Draco boy."

Dazai's fist clenched into the quilt before he could stop himself. He forced himself to relax. "I'll stay focused."

"Good, good. Now, this meeting is just a formality. Lucius Malfoy wants to meet you. He also probably wants to see if he can work you under his thumb."

Dazai grunted. He figured as much. "He isn't put off at all by the fact that I killed Quirrell, *huh?"*

“Perhaps a little,” Mori said, “but it wasn’t anything he hadn’t already considered a possibility. It’s a good thing you killed that man, actually. Otherwise, Lucius wouldn’t be taking us quite so seriously now. By killing a player for our main competition—the Death Eaters—you’ve already put on a fairly good show.”

“What exactly do you want out of his loyalty, anyway?”

“That’s for me to worry about,” Mori responded. There was a sharp edge to his voice that had Dazai quickly falling silent. “All in due time. For now, I only need you to convince him that the Port Mafia is serious. You can do that, can’t you?”

“Obviously.”

Mori hummed. Then, with a hint of amusement, he said, “Historically, the Malfoy family has associated themselves with the Death Eaters, so you won’t have much groundwork to lay. Furthermore, Lucius’ loyalties lay with whatever organization will keep him and his wealth safe. If he believes that we will utterly destroy the Death Eaters, then he will have all the more reason to support the Port Mafia instead.”

Dazai paused. Slowly, he pushed himself upright. “There’s a history there,” he commented. Dazai forcefully kept the interest from his voice—but knowing Mori, the doctor likely had already picked up on it. Hence why he was always dangling little pieces of information just overhead like meat to a starving mutt.

When Mori merely laughed, Dazai knew his assumptions were correct. He sighed.

“Nothing exceptional,” he said, simply. “And nothing for you to bother yourself with. Your only job right now is to look pretty and to pass Lucius’ test.”

“Gross.” This whole situation reeked.

They talked for a few minutes more before Mori finally hung up, saying, “*ah*—if I don’t get back to my patient now, they’ll bleed out!”

The line clicked. Dead.

Dazai blew out a heavy breath. Unceremoniously, he threw his phone across the bed. It landed on the quilt, but didn’t slide far enough to *thunk* onto the floor. He almost wanted it to fall—to shatter apart before Mori could call him again.

So Mori had known about the Demon Student nonsense. Just thinking about it...

The newspaper flashed through Dazai’s mind. And the panicked image of Tom upon hearing his name—afraid out of his mind.

What had Mori said?

Fear is a wonderful motivator.

Dazai sniffed.

Seeming to read his spiraling thoughts, Featherbrain hooted from her cage. Dazai rolled over on the bed to face her, arms falling loosely at his sides.

“At least when you visit Mori, I don’t have to hear back for a week,” he told the bird. "Phones are the worst. Maybe wizards have it right, slowing down communication like this...”

Featherbrain made a sound that might have been humor. Whatever the owl version of laughing was, anyway. Dazai blinked, sedate.

“That’s right. You get it.”

Featherbrain cooed. Then, with a ruffle of her feathers, she bit at the iron bars of the cage. Dazai watched her fuss for a moment before pushing himself off the bed. With precise hands, Dazai undid the latch keeping her cage close. Once it swung open, the owl happily hopped out into the room. She gave a hoot and blinked up at Dazai with big eyes.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

Featherbrain chirped.

“And be quiet. Go hunt a mouse or something,” Dazai said with a huff.

Without affect, Dazai turned and collapsed back into the bed. He pressed his face into the mattress. He was just starting to close his eyes when Featherbrain let out another noise.

“What—*oh.”*

Slowly, Dazai pushed himself upright, keeping all of his weight on one precarious elbow.

Something fell from Featherbrain’s mouth. It landed with a *fwhump* onto the mattress. Dazai blinked down at it, then back up to the owl.

A small pile of very familiar goods rested between them.

“...did you steal those from Mori?” Dazai asked, eyeing the hoard. A few cufflinks stared back at him. A tie clip, a fancy pen... He glanced back to Featherbrain, who seemed to be waiting for something. “*Huh*. Maybe you aren’t such a pest after all. Good bird.”

Featherbrain preened.

“That will teach him to keep us in the dark,” Dazai said for good measure. “At least you have my back, stupid bird.”

A Declaration of War

Chapter Summary

Dazai makes a new friend and a new enemy - in that order.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dazai didn’t leave his inn room for the following two days.

It was mostly practical: the innkeeper didn’t want to see him, and Dazai didn’t want any trouble. Moreover, they weren’t the only few occupants anymore. The occasional sound of footsteps down the hall continued over the next couple days. Dazai had no interest in testing just how welcome he was here.

This also meant, of course, that Dazai didn’t have any food. He didn’t particularly mind. Often, he was too deep in thought to even notice the pangs from his stomach.

Featherbrain didn’t suffer the same fate. Dazai couldn’t stand her raucous hooting, and after only a few hours in the Leaky Cauldron, he’d pried open the window.

“Go hunt around London, for all I care,” he’d bit out. “A place like this is sure to have rats.”

Three hours later, Featherbrain had returned with a dead mouse hanging from her beak. She dropped it at his feet.

Dazai’s nose had scrunched up.

Then Featherbrain had butted her head against the mouse, pushing it into his shoes.

“I’m not eating a creature that scurries around subways and digs through trash.” A bolt of realization had suddenly occurred to him. “...Actually, go deliver that to Mori.”

Featherbrain didn’t run away to Mori, but she didn’t let up, either. By the end of his third day at the Leaky Cauldron, a pile of at least a dozen dead rats and mice had formed at the foot of Dazai’s bed. Dazai hoped Tom wouldn’t mind. He really *was* trying to stay on his best behavior. *Although maybe if he didn't, Tom actually would kill him...*

Now that was a thought. Dazai relished in it for a bit, but in the end only quietly stayed in his room, trouble-free.

On the third day, Dazai drew a coat around his shoulders, steeled his expression, and unlocked the door. Freshly showered and bandaged, Dazai looked nothing at all like he’d

spent the last few days locked in a small room, barely moving. He twisted the key in the lock before pocketing it.

Lucius Malfoy would be kept waiting for him if he dawdled any longer.

The common room of the Leaky Cauldron looked just as it had a few days prior. Unlike last time, however, the pub was no longer empty. A group of older-looking wizards had taken over a table by the door. At the bar, a couple people with large, pointed hats were chatting over what must have been their breakfast. Dazai ignored them, hoping to sneak into Diagon Alley without someone recognizing him as Hogwarts' so-called 'Demon Student.'

Pointing his feet at the back wall, Dazai headed straight towards the Diagon Alley entrance.

"Ahem..."

Damn.

So close, yet so, so far!

Dazai froze, then quickly made his expression one of unobtrusive question. *"Hm?"* He turned. The owner was watching him from behind the bar. "Good morning, Tom. I'm only heading out to buy my supplies for this year."

The customers sitting at the bar briefly glanced up at him, but evidently deemed him unimportant. Dazai was just another student to them, for now. They looked away after a second to continue their conversation over a breakfast of sausage and eggs.

Dazai really was lucky Skeeter hadn't gotten his photo in the paper.

Tom, meanwhile, was still watching him. There was a cautiousness in his gaze, but Dazai noted the man didn't look nearly as frantic as he had the other day. The stiffness in his shoulders was beguiled by the worried press of his lips and brows. *"Er..."* Tom frowned. It took a moment before he seemed to decide on what to say. "Are you going to have breakfast?"

Dazai tilted his head. "I'm running late."

He wasn't. The Port Mafia didn't tolerate tardiness.

Tom swallowed hard. "It's just, you haven't come out for food since you got here—"

"Aw, lighten up, Tom!" A customer cut-in. Despite the early time, a serving of ale was already in front of them. They reeked of booze strong enough that Dazai knew this wasn't their first drink of the day, either. "Kid's clearly on his way to meet with a friend!"

Upon seeing Tom's wide-eyed expression, Dazai had mercy on the man. "That's right," he said. Lucius Malfoy was a friend-to-be of the Port Mafia, he supposed. "I should be going." Wouldn't want to make a bad first impression."

Tom hadn't dropped his bewildered stare, but he didn't seem like he was going to share Dazai's identity with the other patrons. Dazai was briefly grateful when Tom coughed into his fist and brushed aside whatever questions he was currently choking on, "*Er*—Enjoy yourself."

"Thanks!" Dazai beamed. "*Ah,* Tom. Could you open the door for me? I'm so bad with magic, I'd probably mess it up."

The customer burst out in drunken laughter.

Beside them, Tom looked stupefied. He shook it off at Dazai's continued silence. "Yeah, okay. Here—"

Tom drew a wand from his back pocket. He stepped out from behind the bar and tapped it against the brick wall in a seemingly random pattern. Then, with a humming swell of magic, the brick began to fold away. It buzzed noisily in Dazai's skull for another few seconds. But once the magic had settled, an open doorway stood in its place. Tom returned his wand to his side with a nod.

"Thanks!"

Dazai skipped through the doorway with a wave goodbye.

Behind his back, Dazai heard the customer comment, *"nice kid,"* followed by Tom's more suffocated, *"urgh—y-yeah, he is..."*

Then the brick wall threaded shut.

With a bark of dull magic, the door closed completely, leaving only a blank slate in its wake. Dazai forced himself not to collapse back into it, even though the thought of a brief reprieve was promising. But if he were to accidentally nullify the doorway, it wouldn't just be Dazai trapped in Diagon Alley.

Tucking his fingers into his slacks pockets, Dazai was careful to keep his hands to himself.

Diagon Alley stretched out before him a long row of buildings and robed wizards. Unlike last time, Dazai was now able to recognize some of the shops. Flourish and Blotts—a bookstore—immediately caught Dazai's attention. Unfortunately, he hadn't the time to explore at the moment. Though perhaps that was for the best. An unusually sizable crowd was formed around the shop now, and Dazai generally made an effort to avoid large groupings.

Madamn Malkin's Robes for All Occasions was another shop Dazai recognized. He also spotted Olivander's wand shop a little way off. Quietly, Dazai was relieved he wouldn't have to return there. Not only did Olivander have a watchful eye, there was a slight chance he might recognize Dazai on sight.

Recognize the *Demon Student* on site.

Nothing but trouble, that.

At the end of the long alley stood the ever-impressive Gringott's Bank. Tall enough a jump would kill him. Shame Dazai didn't have the time for that.

Destination set, Dazai stuck to the fringes as he walked to the bank. He was careful not to butt into too many passersbys. Mercifully, the other wizards mostly kept to themselves. Dazai wasn't outright recognizable despite the stories circulating about him. It helped that he was slight of frame—easily sneaking around groups of people or ducking under raised arms.

When Dazai reached Gringott's, he stopped and looked around. As expected, no one called out to him. Dazai had intentionally arrived to the meeting early. Not only would it give him time to exchange some muggle funds at the bank, it also let him scope out the area. Looking for escape routes should the need arise, observing Lucius from the shadows, practicing the charming smile on his face...

Preparation was an important tool for all mafioso on a deep cover mission.

Dazai straightened a grin on his lips. No one paid the young mafioso a second glance as he let himself into Gringott's.

Gringott's looked exactly as he remembered it. The bank was all ornate marble and pillars, but otherwise lacked the magical flashiness Dazai had come to associate with other places, like Hogwarts. Dazai glanced around, walking towards the desk when he spotted an open teller.

A goblin stared down at him. Their lip immediately curled back in disgust.

Dazai fiddled around his coat for a moment before unceremoniously dropping a banded stack of cash on the desk. When the goblin didn't immediately reach out, Dazai smiled. "I'm aware you can't touch me," he said plainly. No Longer Human was no secret between magical creatures, as he'd come to realize the year prior. "But I really do need this in wizarding currency. The quicker you exchange it, the quicker I'm out of your way."

By this point, quite a few pairs of goblin eyes had flashed in Dazai's direction. Just as soon as they did, however, they all turned away and went back to their work.

The teller eyed him for a moment before letting out a gravelly sigh. "Very well..." they trailed off. Slowly, so as to watch Dazai's every move, they snatched the money off the desk. Then, with practiced ease, they counted the stack. Not a minute later a freshly tied sack of knuts, sickles, and galleons slid across the desk.

Dazai caught it before it could spill over the table's edge and across the floor.

"Watch your hands..." they cautioned, voice slight.

"I'll be careful," Dazai said with a nod. To prove his point, he shoved his hands deep into his pockets. Though the teller didn't look at all contented, they didn't press him any further, either. "Thank you."

"Hrm..."

Dazai smiled. He was about to step away from the goblin, when he thought to ask, “Do you have the time?”

They stiffly gestured to the wall. A large clock hung there, fingers indicating it was five minutes to nine. Not long until his meeting, now. When Dazai turned back to the goblin to respond, they cut him off with a quick, “get out.”

“Ah... will do! Thanks again.”

Cheerfully, Dazai backed away from the desk. He was careful to keep his hands pocketed, knowing that there were other goblins about the bank. As always seemed to be the case with No Longer Human, carelessly reaching around was liable to have catastrophic consequences. Dazai didn’t want a dead goblin on his hands. Not today, at least. Certainly not in front of more than a dozen other bank-goers.

Luckily, no one else seemed to have noticed Dazai’s odd interaction with the goblin. He had been careful to keep his voice low, but one could never truly be sure.

Speaking of eavesdropping...

Dazai exited the bank and made a quick turn to lean up against the building’s exterior wall. He rested up against it with a huff. From this position, Dazai had a clear view of the entire clearing. People milled about shop fronts and chatted business in the streets. From his vantage point, Dazai was also able to scope out the area for the white hair of the Malfoy clan. Dazai looked down on the pedestrians with a blank expression.

Lucius Malfoy must be amongst them, somewhere. Dazai had never met the man before, but wasn’t especially concerned. No one in magical society was particularly a threat to him, for starters. For another, Dazai was intimately familiar with the man’s type.

Manipulative, slimy, and powerful. Like the magical version of Mori, Dazai supposed.

With someone like that, Dazai wanted to maintain his upper hand. He knew, personally, just how quickly a conversation with someone like that could get out of hand.

He would keep their conversation brief—the meet-and-greet it was meant to be, and not a full-scale information exchange like Lucius probably wanted.

Thinking this, Dazai scanned the crowds below.

He reached into his pocket to withdraw a sickle, flipping it over his fingers while he watched. With a flick, it spun up into the air. A flash of silver light caught on its rim before twirling back into Dazai’s open palm. It landed heads-up. Dazai sniffed, then tossed it again. Heads.

A different silver shine suddenly caught Dazai’s attention.

He stood up straighter, eyes immediately seeking out one person in the crowd below.

A long swath of silver hair flooded out from the man’s head. He had a deep scowl on his face —one that spoke more on condescension than disinterest. The robes he wore were black and

decorated with a fine white embroidery. The man walked with a thin cane, though it seemed to be more for appearances sake than for functional reasons. He held it aloft rather than leaning into it.

Lucius Malfoy, Dazai's mind supplied without prompting. This man certainly fit the mental image Dazai had constructed for Draco's father. Pompous and expensive. His general appearance practically screamed *rich and powerful socialite.*

Lucius glanced around for a second when his scowl deepened.

Looking for me? Dazai wondered, vaguely amused.

Although he wanted nothing more than to keep the man waiting as a 'screw-you' to Mori, it was best not to make enemies of people like the Malfoys. Dazai was just considering making his entrance when something else caught his eye. He jumped.

Lucius wasn't alone.

Dazai's eyes widened as he recognized the man's much younger companion.

Draco!

Dazai immediately picked out the figure of his friend walking to Lucius' side. Draco looked a little taller, but otherwise identical to when Dazai had last seem him. He watched the silver-blonde boy cross his arms and pinch his brow. Self-importance oozed off of him.

Something warm bit at Dazai's chest. He coughed to clear it.

Just a step behind Draco was an older-looking woman. Her hair was an odd mix of Malfoy-silver and chestnut brown. Her bright pink lipstick instantly reminded Dazai of Rita Skeeter, but that was where the similarities stopped. He didn't recognize her, but judging by present company? This must have been Miss Malfoy. Dazai couldn't recall ever having heard her name.

Dazai flipped his coin. He decided it would land tails, and a second later it did.

Draco's biting voice carried across the clearing, ringing in Dazai's ears where he'd been listening for it.

"Where is this ambassador? Anyone who leaves a Malfoy waiting isn't worth our time, Father."

Dazai nearly dropped his sickle. He stared down at where Draco and his family were gathered. Had Lucius not mentioned to his son who they were meeting?

Just 'ambassador.' Dazai tasted the word on his tongue.

Mutely, he wondered just how filled in the young Malfoy was. Or, moreover, how much explaining Dazai would have to do later. When he and Draco could talk in private. Or maybe

he'd never explain himself at all, and they would just have this little ambassadorial secret unspoken between them.

Knowing Draco, though...

Well. There was no getting out of it, now.

"If there were only a way to avoid interacting with the rabble," Miss Malfoy breathed. Her expression was one of deep disdain as she glared at the passerbys. Seemingly worried about those reprehensible pedestrians, she took a protective step into Draco's side. "I would suggest we simply cut ties with this... group. They aren't even pureblooded."

"The Port Mafia," Lucius corrected. Dazai noted that he didn't disagree with his wife's lack of enthusiasm, nor her purist views. His shoulders were held stiffly. "Although it appears outwardly to be an irrelevant organization, it is anything but. We must put up with its less-than commendable purity for the time being."

"I suppose." Draco stood perfectly straight.

"They could do with a lesson in tardiness, at the very least."

To anyone further away, the Malfoys looked the picture of regal. For Dazai, who was close enough to listen in, the Malfoys reeked of condescension and ill-intent.

"I don't see why we have to be meeting this Port Mafia, anyway," Draco said after a moment, sounding annoyed. "Since when has the Malfoy family ever needed to pledge loyalty to some puffed-up organization? With a name like 'Port Mafia,' no less. How haughty—"

"Nonsense." Lucius Mafloy snapped. His voice was like ice. At once, Draco and Miss Malfoy went silent. Something sharpened in the man's posture. In Miss Malfoy's, too. Something unspoken and unkind passed between them.

Dazai saw Draco duck his head and grind his teeth.

Alright, Dazai thought, *now is a good time to make an appearance.*

With a final toss of his sickle, Dazai pushed off the wall and jumped two steps at a time. "Mr. Malfoy, Sir," he greeted, a pleasing smile automatically falling across his lips. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Three pairs of eyes snapped straight to him. Draco's mouth fell open.

"Dazai?! What are you doing here?!"

"Meeting with your father, of course," Dazai tutted. "Good morning, Sir. Ma'am. Draco."

Lucius didn't look at all surprised at Dazai's boyish appearance, as expected. Beside him, Miss Malfoy briefly frowned. She recovered almost immediately, however. It was only Draco who seemed to be struggling to keep his expression in check.

Kept in the dark, then. Dazai could relate.

“You’re late,” Lucius ground out. His voice was very matter-of-fact.

“I’m just on time, actually.”

Judging by Lucius’ unimpressed stare, the other man didn’t particularly care for details. Dazai got the sense that Lucius was the type to always assume he was right and disregard anything saying otherwise.

“This is just an informal meeting, anyway,” Dazai said with a smile. He waved off Lucius’ upset with a bandaged hand. “Don’t look so tense, Sir.”

Lucius’ frown deepened. He didn’t seem to appreciate Dazai’s lighthearted cheer. However, politics won out over his own dislike. “Dazai Osamu, I understand?”

“That’s right,” Dazai tipped his head. “And you’re Lucius Malfoy, eloquent head to the Malfoy family. Of course, I know your son Draco.” He glanced to Lucius’ wife, thought about shaking her hand, but quickly decided otherwise. Instead, he dipped into a slight bow. “I’m not familiar with your lovely wife, however. Your name, Miss...?”

“Narcissa Malfoy,” she responded, sounding surprised, but pleased.

“It’s a pleasure, Narcissa,” Dazai said.

Narcissa tittered behind a gloved hand. It was lacey and black and entirely without function.

“Why is your Port Mafia suddenly butting its head into magic affairs?”

Dazai blinked away from Narcissa to face her husband. The man’s tone was stern, but not entirely without reason. Dazai lifted his chin. “Nothing too strenuous,” he assured. “The Port Mafia is hoping to integrate further with the magical community. Why not start with the most wealthy and powerful family?”

Dazai kept the details light. Mori himself was playing his cards very close to his chest. No doubt, the Malfoys were just another pawn to the man.

He tossed his sickle into the air. It spun for a second before landing on the back of his palm.

“But that’s not what you really wanted to ask, is it?”

Lucius tracked the coin with obvious suspicion. The sickle landed tails. Lucius glared down at it as if it had offended him.

“I would have preferred to meet the boss of your organization,” Lucius said, “though I suppose it cannot be helped.”

Dazai felt himself frowning unintentionally. The boss of the Port Mafia was unstable—that was common knowledge. Mori, however...

“If you play nice with the Port Mafia, I’m sure I could arrange something.”

At the wording, Lucius abruptly looked as though he had smelled something rank and awful.

Dazai spared Draco a fast glance.

The other boy was watching him with narrowed, thoughtful eyes. His lips were pressed into a thin line and his brows were pulled together. Dazai couldn’t read the emotion there. Suspicion? Distrust? Something curdled in Dazai’s stomach.

The sickle landed again with a click. Dazai dropped his hand down onto it. “What do you think, Sir? Heads or tails?”

Lucius scoffed. “I will not be playing childish games with you.”

Dazai hummed. “It’s not a game, Lucius. Just simple probability.”

Lucius stared down at him, entirely nonplussed. There was an annoyed-looking press to his brow that said the man was trying to figure Dazai out.

With a sigh, Dazai peeked below his hand. “Tails,” he said. “You would have gotten it wrong.”

His eyes narrowed minutely. “I am not playing.”

“No, but you seemed like you were thinking it was heads.” Lucius didn’t react, but Dazai knew he was right. Dazai eyed the eldest Malfoy as he gave the coin another toss. The sickle spun in the air before landing again on the back of Dazai’s hand. A griffin’s head stared back at him. “Heads. You would have won this time, had you decided to play.”

He tossed the coin again.

“Heads," Draco said.

Dazai startled, but didn’t fumble the catch.

The sickle landed on his palm, head-side up.

Draco stared at him. “I win,” the snake said, voice perfectly even.

Dazai blinked a few times before shaking off the expression. Then, he plastered a toothy grin across his face. “That you do!”

“As the winner, I should get a reward.” Draco lifted his chin, so as to look down on Dazai. “Buy me something nice.”

“Draco—” Lucius barked.

“No, no, he’s right.” Dazai reassured, effortlessly flipping the coin once more before pocketing it. He kept his hand fisted behind the cloth. “It’s only logical: the winner of any

game should get a prize."

Lucius' sneer briefly flickered. The man seemed genuinely surprised by his easy-going acceptance. Dazai understood why—the Port Mafia wasn't exactly known for being passive about having things demanded of it. Still, Dazai merely smiled.

"Our involvement with the Port Mafia—"

"You can speak with Mori about the details. I wasn't under the impression we were here to talk business, Lucius. Just a meeting. Unless you want me to ring the boss up right now, tell him Lucius is demanding things of us already?"

Lucius bit his tongue. "Very well," he ground out.

Dazai nodded. He was about to suggest something to Draco when—

"You are right, my apologies. Mori is not giving you any control over this ordeal. Is he, boy?" Lucius asked with an air of thoughtfulness. The words seemed to drip from his mouth. A lie—or just slimy in the way all bosses were. "To him, you are just another player in his game."

Speak for yourself, Dazai quipped silently.

"Perhaps, together, we could find you a better suited position."

Dazai eyed Lucius with a flat face.

It wasn't hard to see Lucius was trying to manipulate him. Dazai forced his expression to remain blank, a look that silently spoke, *'whatever you think you want from me, I couldn't care less.'*

When he didn't immediately respond, Lucius tapped his cane on the ground. Dazai's eyes snapped to it, then back to Lucius. "Pawn to some forgotten organization is no fitting thing for the next Dark Lord to be, after all."

Dazai's hand stilled in his pocket, hovering over a silver coin.

He smothered any emotion immediately. "It was lovely meeting you," he said instead of answering, voice dull.

Lucius paused, then blinked in surprise at the response. He spoke slowly, as if sizing Dazai up. "...That it was."

Lucius seemed still to be considering him.

Dazai felt himself doing the same.

Draco looked between them. Because Dazai didn't turn to watch the other boy, he could only guess at what expression was written there.

Contempt, maybe.

After a too-long moment, Narcissa cleared her throat.

Lucius held his gaze for a second longer. Dazai was the first to look away, feigning disinterest.

“Perhaps,” Narcissa spoke, “we might postpone this conversation for another time. Draco, dear, we need to do your shopping for the school year.”

Dazai rolled back on his heels, preparing to step away to do his own school shopping. He had met with Lucius and completed Mori’s first assignment—a success. With the meeting finished, Dazai would be on his way.

Bridges successful built, roads officially paved. Mori could manage the rest himself. *Deserved to,* for throwing him into the brink like this.

Then, to Dazai’s utter surprise, Draco cleared his throat.

“Dazai, will you be tagging along?”

Lucius balked at his son’s question.

Dazai, having thought their meeting was concluded, reacted much the same. *“Huh?”*

Draco was undeterred. He puffed out his chest. “Father, Mother. I know Dazai—he’s bound to get lost if he’s alone. I’d like to keep an eye on him.”

"Well... I was planning to spend my afternoon climbing up Gringott's and taking a swan-dive into the street below, but... I do need to buy you that prize, don't I?” Dazai chuckled, bouncing back quickly with a casual smile as he recovered himself. He faced Narcissa. She seemed the more pleasant of the duo. “If you’ll have me.”

Narcissa’s surprise warmed over almost instantaneously. *“Oh!* You’re a friend of my Draco?”

Dazai smiled, even as Lucius looked to be deeply regretting bringing his family along. “He didn’t say?”

Narcissa didn’t look in the slightest upset that her son was friends with a mafioso. She also didn’t seem surprised that Draco hadn’t told her about their friendship. Dazai got the distinct impression that the Malfoy’s weren’t a particularly close family. Not that Dazai had any room to speak—the cuts on his face spoke well enough of his relationship with Father.

“He certainly did not.” The airiness in Lucius’ tone spoke of his noble lifestyle. Despite that, Dazai could easily read the growl under his words.

Draco must have heard it as well. The other boy’s expression fell, but he covered the slip not a second later. Dazai was almost impressed.

Looking between Draco and his father, Dazai tasted something bitter on his tongue. It wasn't that he was *worried* for Draco, per se. But...

"Draco is a good friend," Dazai explained. Although he was smiling Narcissa's way, the words were only partially for her ears. "I owe him a lot, for some stuff he helped me with last year." Thinking fast, he explained, "I asked him to watch over my pet for me when I left."

Draco nodded.

Beside him, Narcissa and Lucius' eyes lit up with sudden realization. No doubt, the image of a young, Norwegian Ridgeback dragon had just flashed across both of their minds. Draco must have done a good job convincing them to let him keep Egg, Dazai thought. There was *definitely* a story there. Dazai had nearly forgotten about that whole ordeal, with everything else going on, but the Malfoys certainly hadn't.

Narcissa beamed, seeming pleased, somehow.

She was the weakest link here, Dazai decided. He smiled at her because of it.

Lucius' frown shifted almost minutely. Replacing the cold anger that was there seconds before, his gaze turned thoughtful. Appraising.

Draco shot Dazai a surprised glance. However, their staring contest didn't last more than a second, as Draco turned his focus back to watch Lucius' expression within the second. The boy seemed to melt as his father's pressuring gaze suddenly turned easy.

"I suppose, then, that's good." Lucius hummed. His fingers danced over the head of his cane. Looking closer, Dazai saw that the cane was topped with a metal snake design. Its maw was gaping open and sharp, as though trying to devour anyone who dared look its way. The cane shone just as bright and silver as Dazai's coin. "It seems the Malfoys and the Port Mafia are already well on their way to an alliance. Good, Draco."

Draco nearly jumped, pride shimmering on his face. "Of course, Father."

Lucius looked between Dazai and his son, the expression behind his eyes hard to read. They waited a moment in silence before, slowly, Lucius nodded his assent.

Draco let out a barely-there sigh.

Then, taking charge, he announced, "Let's get our books." His eyes flicked to Lucius, who gave no indication of further disagreement. Seeing this, Draco barged onwards, "Have you seen the list, Dazai? It's almost entirely full of Gilderoy Lockhart's books."

It seemed that was that, then.

Dazai kept Lucius and Narcissa at the edges of his attention, but otherwise let himself turn his focus to Draco. Narcissa, at the very least, seemed pleased with the idea of them being school friends. Perhaps Dazai could get her on his side if he played nice right now.
Course set, Dazai smiled pleasantly.

“I saw... Should I recognize that name?” He mumbled.

The intricacies of magical society still escaped him a year later. Was the man famous, or something? Celebrity gossip hadn’t been one of Dazai’s research topics in the past. Thinking this, Dazai reached into his coat. He felt around for a second before pulling out a slip of yellowed paper.

Draco peeked over his shoulder.

“He’s an author. He’s going to be our Defense Against the Dark Arts professor this year... Wait a second!” Draco said, snatching the letter.

Dazai let him, flinching at the unexpected grab. He covered up the unconscious reaction by crossing his arms over his chest.

“I don’t recognize some of these books!” Draco scanned the page. His brows furrowed as he continued to read. “Your required reading list is different from mine.”

Dazai frowned. “It is?”

He looked inquiringly at Draco. After a moment, the other boy relented. “Mother, could you hand me my letter?”

Narcissa retrieved a slip of paper from her robe and gave it to Draco. Over her shoulder, Dazai saw Lucius watching with blank, assessing eyes. He held the man’s gaze.

“A History of Magic, Magical Drafts and Potions...” Draco read aloud. He looked between the two papers, comparing their contents. Dazai let his eyes drift away from Lucius only when Draco let out a loud, “Here! *The Biology of Magic.* I don’t have that one.”

Dazai hummed. “What else is different?” he asked, swiping the paper back. He suppressed a chuckle at Draco’s returning glare. “Do you have this one? *Magical Theory, a Continuation.”*

“I don’t,” Draco said. He folded up his letter with a frown. “What’s going on? Why do you have more books than me?”

Dazai inspected his list for another few seconds before doing the same. He was about to make some joking remark when the answer suddenly occurred to him. “The professors must have worked out my new curriculum by now.”

Thinking about the books on his list again, that must have been it. Controlling and understanding magic would be very important to a student that was hurt by spell-casting. Curious, Dazai wondered just how his lessons would pan out this year compared to the last. And unlike last year, Dazai thought ruefully, there was no illusion of going unnoticed by his professors. After Quirrell, *everyone* would have their eyes on him.

Draco’s frown fell into an 'O.'

Someone cleared their throat. Dazai and Draco both looked up to where Lucius was watching them with a scowl. Draco answered the unspoken question there before Dazai could get any

words out.

“Dazai has a weakness to magic—it makes him ill,” Draco explained, voice steady. “Last year, the professors were working on an alternate curriculum that would be safe for him while also keeping him on track with his year.”

Lucius raised a single brow, but didn’t comment.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” Narcissa said. She peered down at Dazai, as if expecting to see the ailment on his person. Evidently finding nothing of worth, her lips twitched downward in unmistakable disgust.

Dazai offered a guileless smile, trying for the image of *hopeless muggleborn fool.*

Draco shot him an unimpressed look before turning to his mother. “If I hadn’t seen it myself, I would call him a liar as well. Regardless,” he waved the folded-up letter, “I would like to buy my books sometime before Diagon Alley becomes overly crowded.”

“I agree,” Lucius said, snapping back into the conversation.

Diagon Alley was basically one, long road—even Dazai would have a hard time getting lost here. Despite this, Dazai easily stepped back, allowing Draco to take the lead. Draco took on the position with the sort of casual leadership wealthy folk often did. Narcissa hovered over her son’s shoulder, whereas Lucius fell into the back of their group. Dazai felt the older man’s shadow over him. Ignoring the cold feeling in his chest, Dazai joined Draco at the front.

As they walked, the people of Diagon Alley gave them a wide berth. People stared at them as they passed, watching the Malfoys with something like reverence. Dazai tried to ignore the eyes on them. Walking boldly at the front of the Malfoy family was drawing a lot of attention. Although it made Dazai uncomfortable, nothing could be done about it now. Not without revealing his discomfort to the Malfoy patriarch.

Hoping to distract himself, Dazai saddled up closer to Draco’s side. The other boy raised a brow.

“It’s no fair, making me spend more on books than everyone else,” Dazai commented abruptly, kicking his feet out with each step. "I'll just die instead."

Draco looked amused. “You shouldn’t be complaining about money now—not when you still owe me a reward.” He still didn’t comment on their sudden closeness. “Save it for after.”

“It’s not about money.” The Port Mafia was funding this job, after all. Dazai couldn’t be short on funds if he tried. “It’s the principle of the thing. Anyway, I don’t know what you expect me to buy you. A rich family like the Malfoys already has everything they could ever dream of, right?”

Draco hummed, agreeing without argument. “Buy me ice cream, then.”

Dazai considered the idea. Turning his head back and forth, he searched around Diagon Alley. Seeing this, Draco explained, “Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlor,” he pointed.

Dazai followed his finger to a rather sunny-looking shop just to their left. Peeking through the window, Dazai saw an impressive display of iced treats ranging from normal colors to more outlandish, surprising ones. A neon-red flavor caught his interest in particular. Dazai mutely wondered what magical flavors must be inside. The table outside—topped with a rainbow umbrella—was empty.

Before Dazai could respond, Narcissa interrupted. “After we finish our shopping,” she said. Then, with a certain unexplained bite to her tone, she added, “Perhaps.”

Draco looked like he wanted to argue, but held his tongue at the last moment. Amused by the unusually childish interaction, Dazai teased, “I didn’t know you had a sweet-tooth, Draco."

Draco bristled. He leveled Dazai with a pointed glare.

Dazai laughed.

As they approached the bookstore, Diagon Alley became suddenly more-and-more busy. There were people milling about the street and store-fronts. Dazai frowned. Even just half-an-hour earlier when Dazai first passed through, there weren’t nearly this many people.

His eyes widened when the bookstore’s large wooden door came into view.

“We may be too late to avoid crowds, Draco,” Dazai commented, tilting his chin to gesture towards the bookstore, Flourish and Blotts.

Outside the shop, a long, long line of patrons stood. There were young and old; robed and suited; male, female, and otherwise—all lined up and eagerly clutching colorful sets of books to their chests. They were bouncing on their heels and excitedly chatting about something. Dazai’s nose turned up at the bustle. Beside him, Draco did the same.

As Dazai scanned the crowd, his eyes snapped to a folded, wooden sign beside the door.

“Gilderoy Lockhart Book Signing Today!”

It was decorated garishly with stars, hearts, and the not-so charming visage of a blonde-headed man. Lockhart, Dazai presumed.

“Well, we aren’t just going to slip in and out of *that*,” Dazai grumbled, already imagining all the people he was going to have to push against just to get inside. “This Lockhart person better be really special.”

“The man is a loon,” Lucius said without prompting.

Dazai blinked, surprised at the uncharacteristic and unexpected jab. Unwittingly, a smile teased the corners of his lips.

Catching the mafioso’s amused expression, Lucius sneered down at him before turning away.

“I don’t suppose the crowd will be lessening anytime soon,” Draco said mournfully.

Dazai shook his head. With a curled lip, he watched a group of tweens press up against the window, then squeal. Already dreading having to navigate the crowd, Dazai considered just coming back the next day.

Lucius spoke before Dazai could voice his hesitancies aloud. “Enough dawdling.”

Without another word, the senior Malfoy strode to the front of their group and straight towards Flourish and Blotts. Narcissa was the first to jolt, following behind her husband not a second later. Draco and Dazai shared a brief glance before joining as well.

Even with a blockade of fans surrounding the door, Lucius didn’t slow his step. Dazai realized, with some respect, that he didn’t *need* to. Annoyed arguments died on their tongues the second they saw just who it was that was approaching. Without a second thought, the crowd parted aside. Lucius, never once having to ask, passed straight through the blocked entrance. Narcissa and Draco followed, proud smirks painted across their faces. Dazai followed a step behind.

Behind them, the crowd was silent for a moment.

A second later and the line had filled back up around the door, excited chattering resuming.

So that was the unspoken power of the Malfoy name...

If Dazai had hoped inside Flourish and Blotts would be any more peaceful, he would have been sorely mistaken. The shop was jammed full of over-eager fans, clustered and lined up around the front of the shop. Dazai pressed himself as close to Draco’s side as he could without touching. A cover of bodies and robes filled his vision.

Seemingly used to his antics by now, Draco simply rolled his eyes. He hooked a finger around Dazai’s coat sleeve and summarily dragged the mafioso further into the shop where the crowd was less dense.

“It’s awfully noisy,” Draco said, once it was no longer too loud to hear each other speak. “Let’s find our books and get out of here.”

Dazai nodded. He was equally (if not more so) eager to leave the bustle. Not only did he dislike the pressure of large crowds, but Dazai was also dealing with the stress of No Longer Human potentially revealing itself amongst the shoving. If even one of these people noticed their spell suddenly cutting out, or their magical artifact suddenly shattering...

Well, it was best to just avoid the situation as a whole.

“Come on. If I recall correctly, the history books are over here,” Draco said, snatching Dazai’s attention back.

Dazai followed with a short word of agreement. When Draco suddenly halted in his tracks to snatch a book from the shelf, Dazai did the same. He scanned the cover and leafed through some of the pages.

Suddenly, it occurred to him—

“Hey, where did Lucius and Narcissa go?”

Draco blinked out of his own quiet musings. Frowning, he looked around.

“We must have lost them at the front. I don’t see them either,” he commented, a pinch between his brows. Then he snapped his focus back to Dazai with a scowl. “And don’t call my parents by their first names. It sounds weird coming out of your mouth.”

“They may be *your* parents, but they’re *my* business partners.”

That drew a surprised look from Draco, who quickly covered the expression with something tight. Whatever he was thinking, Draco shook it away with a literal shake of his head. “Right. And don’t think we won’t be talking about that once we’re somewhere more private. What in the *stars* is going on, *Mr. Port Mafia?!*”

Dazai laughed airily. “I thought as much. If it means anything, I didn’t think you would be coming to this meeting, Draco.”

“That doesn’t make anything better. It just means you were planning to lie to me about it later,” he grumbled.

Dazai shrugged, seeing no reason to deny the accusation.

Seeming to take the lack of answer for what it was, Draco huffed. “Speaking of things we definitely need to talk about,” Draco said, starting to walk down the aisle once again. He gestured for Dazai to follow. “What happened to your face? It’s all banged up.”

Dazai brought a hand to his cheek, feeling the gauze there. “We haven’t seen each other in months, and you jump straight to the interrogations... What ever happened to emotional reunions between friends, *hm?”*

“I seem to recall that you hate emotions,” Draco responded, entirely nonplussed. At Dazai’s blank look, he added, “Blaise said.”

“Ah.”

Draco plucked a book from the shelf, handed it to Dazai, then grabbed another copy for himself. “So?”

“Accidental magic,” Dazai said, remembering what Tom had guessed just the other day.

Unlike Tom, however, Draco looked completely unconvinced. He raised a brow. *“You?* Accidental magic? I’ll believe it when I see it. Without my guidance, you couldn’t even manage a spark of magic. I shudder to think how little you can manage on your own. Well... except for that one time.”

When No Longer Human killed the mountain troll during Halloween, Dazai remembered. Having nothing to say on the matter, however, he simply shrugged.

“You owe it to me, to say.” Draco was unshaken.

My father knocked me around during one of his episodes.

No, no. Dazai couldn't say that. It would only cause his friends to fuss—because *Merlin* knew they loved to fuss over trivial things like that. Violence was natural in the mafia. Draco wouldn't understand that. But, even then... acid burned in his stomach at just the thought of admitting to the truth. It stayed his tongue.

Dazai replaced the ambiguous feeling with a joking, "I thought I owed you ice cream?"

"That, too."

"You're awfully conniving these days." Dazai sniffed.

"Dazai, you're hurt. What's—"

"Dazai!"

"Hey, Dazai!"

The two snakes jumped at the sudden declaration, jolting at their private conversation to see where the shout had come from.

The twin, beaming faces of Fred and George stared back at them.

At his side, Draco suddenly went still. Dazai shot him a glance, before turning a grinning face to the twins. Something giddy burst to life in his chest.

"Fred and George," he greeted with a smile. "Fancy meeting you here again."

The two red-heads were nearly a head taller than the last time Dazai had seem them, obviously having gone through quite the growth spurt. They wore casual clothes and matching grins. Then, without fanfare, they both leaned in and squeezed Dazai into a hug.

"Um—!" Dazai squeaked.

Fred and George relented, pulling back but still grabbing Dazai's shoulders with warm hands. Their eyes were swimming with joy.

"It's been too long, Dazai!"

"We missed you! How've you been?"

"What are those bandages on your face?"

"You're hanging with Draco?"

"Is that a new haircut?"

"Not buying any weird books again this year, are ya'?"

Question after question spilled from their lips as the Weasley twins excitedly tried to play catch-up. Dazai's head spun with the sudden demand, but found that he was more amused than overwhelmed. A giggle bubbled out from his chest.

"Well—"

"Dazai," a whispered grunt said suddenly.

Both Dazai and the twins turned to face Draco, who was looking around the aisle with a steely expression. At some point, he had taken a step back. Dazai raised a brow.

"What's up, Draco?" Fred asked, though his tone was clearly hesitating.

"Did you want us to give you a warm welcome, too?"

Dazai was about to add in his own askance when he abruptly realized what had caught Draco's notice.

Or, rather, what *hadn't.*

The bookstore was very suddenly *deathly* silent.

Dazai's back straightened instinctively, on edge. Distracted by the twins, Dazai hadn't noticed it before. He looked around, following Draco's line of sight to where the patrons of Flourish and Blotts were staring at them, wide eyed. It must have been every single person in the shop was staring right at them. *Fear* seemed to radiate off the crowd.

Fear, Dazai realized with a jolt, *directed only at him.*

Dazai balked as he remembered the twins' greeting: *Dazai.*

They had called his name.

A name that was pasted across every newspaper in the streets, but had, before now, lacked an associated face.

Whispers had broken out among the other patrons.

"Dazai?"

"Isn't that the Demon Student's name?"

"He's here?!"

"What's that monster doing here!?"

The lighthearted air around his group suddenly vanished. Dazai felt his expression shutter closed. He unconsciously took a step back. Dazai bumped into one of the twin's chests, but instead of pushing him away, a hand held him steady in place.

Shit. Maybe Mori was right—he *was* getting careless around his friends.

“Fear not, my dears!”

An unfamiliar voice suddenly cut through the bleak air. It was flowery and light, but seemed to spear the crowd apart nonetheless. People moved aside, making room for the speaker. A blonde-headed man pushed through, wearing a grin bright enough to blind. Dazai grimaced. This stranger had hardly spoken a word, and Dazai already hated him. “Gilderoy Lockhart will take care of things! Now, what appears to be the problem?”

A flash of cameras illuminated the famed author’s arrival.

Dazai heard Draco scoff, but smothered his own reactions for now—very conscious of how some of the crowd let out relieved sighs at Lockhart’s arrival. He didn’t need to go making a bad impression here. Although that bridge may be already too burnt to salvage.

Lockhart’s robes were vivid, flashy colors as he swung them about with each step. He came to a stop at the front of the crowd. A photographer snapped the moment.

“Th-that’s the Demon Student!” Someone squeaked.

“He killed a professor in cold blood!”

“He’ll come for us next!”

Lockhart’s eyes widened, and he did a double-take over Dazai’s slight form. “He doesn’t look all that impressive to me,” he said, cocky.

“It’s true!” A young woman confirmed with a frantic nod. “I read that he just snapped and killed his professor right there!”

“I read that he’s possessed, o-or a follower of You-Know-Who!”

Lockhart raised a hand, cutting off the crowd before they could spiral into shouting again. Hysteria seemed to buzz around him, but Lockhart shared in none of it. He looked, Dazai thought, singularly pleased with himself.

“After all my adventures—you can read about them in my books—, one measly boy is the least threat to me,” Lockhart gloated. “Worry not.”

Dazai stepped forward to meet Lockhart’s eyes head-on. He ignored how the hand on his shoulder seemed to be trying to pull him back. But the hand fell away as Dazai moved just out of reach. “I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure of meeting,” Dazai said serenely. He smiled, small, hoping to look unobtrusive even with his identity hanging open in the air. It wasn’t to late to fix this... right? “I’m only here to buy books, Sir. The rumors surrounding me are a bit exaggerated.”

The crowd seemed to hold its breath.

If Lockhart was surprised by the calm introduction, he didn’t let on. There was a strange emotion swirling about in the man’s eyes that Dazai couldn’t place. As a camera snapped, capturing their stare-down, Lockhart spoke with a booming voice, “Attempting to divert the

blame for your crimes? Certainly, *this* many people cannot be mistaken about your true intentions." His arms spread out wide, gesturing to the dozens of people hiding behind him.

The crowd roared with cheers.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dazai saw a flash of familiar silver hair. Lucius and Narcissa were watching the exchange from nearby. They didn't seem keen on interjecting anytime soon. Unease washed over Dazai as he realized what sort of impression this whole altercation would be making to Lucius.

His job had been to *impress* Lucius, not get *berated* in front of the man.

With a further sense of unwelcome, Dazai realized that Draco had, at some point, snuck away to re-join his family. Draco had an apologetic look on his face, but also remained resolute in staying out of the way.

Beside them, Dazai also saw a group of people with a very distinctive set of red hair. Ron was among them and standing beside a shorter girl with a similarly red head. The rest of the Weasley family, Dazai assumed. He distantly recognized some of them from a year earlier. Ron was looking between Lockhart and Dazai with wide eyes and a gaping mouth.

Expecting a fight, no doubt.

Lockhart's voice tore his attention back to the main problem at hand. "You understand, Demon Boy, that I am a champion of the people."

"Is that in your books? I haven't read any of them," Dazai said.

At his back, Fred and George made a choking sound.

Lockhart didn't look perturbed in the slightest. If anything, he seemed to find the banter encouraging. "You really *must* be some kind of monster. Only a monster would refuse to read my books! Don't you all agree?"

Again, Lockhart's fans cheered their agreement. The walls seemed to shake with enthusiasm.

"The people have spoken," Lockhart preened. "I'm a savior to the people. And you—well, I hear you're an evil unmatched, boy."

Dazai bristled.

He just wanted to buy his books and leave. Was that too much to ask? *Evidently*, he thought, eyeing the swarm of photographers surrounding him now, *it is.* By tomorrow morning, his face would be in every major magical newspaper, front and center.

What a fantastic way to start his second year at Hogwarts. Dazai was already having to say goodbye to the potential of an easy-going, undercover school year and classes hadn't even *started* yet. So much for laying low.

He definitely should have just jumped from Gringott's instead of getting involved with all this nonsense.

“As a champion of the people, I have no choice but to save them.” He paused, giving his fans a second to applaud, before continuing, “I swear on my diamond-bright teeth!” Lockhart swung his arm out in an overdramatic declaration, singling out his prey with one grand point. Every single eye in Flourish and Blotts followed Lockhart’s finger to Dazai’s unimpressed glare. “By the end of the school year, I will have defeated the Demon Student of Hogwarts!”

He winked to his fans. “You can read about it in my next book for only two galleons, okay?”

Chapter End Notes

chapter 1 went up reaaally late wednesday night, so chapter 2 can go up reaally early wednesday morning. gotta keep em guessin LOL

thank you so much for commenting, reading, bookmarking, etc! : D

see yall next week!

Mice

Chapter Summary

Lockhart is maybe the worst person Dazai has ever had the displeasure of meeting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dazai blinked once, then twice.

I'm not the villain here, he wanted to protest. But with the black shadow of the Port Mafia always hanging over him, Dazai wasn't entirely sure that was true.

Still, Dazai was convinced that, at the very least, Lockhart was no *champion of the people.* The man had yet to go even a full minute without finding some way to compliment himself. At least when Draco boasted his prowess, the snake didn't immediately follow it up with a declaration of war.

Lockhart looked incredibly pleased with himself. Dazai wanted little more than to shatter that self-satisfied expression. But he knew he needed to maintain some level of restraint here with Lucius watching.

With *everyone* watching.

Damn Mori for not giving him a heads up.

No—damn Mori for letting things get this far. Dazai was sure the doctor could have shaken off the Daily Prophet somehow. It was almost like he *wanted* the Demon Student story to spread its fingers through the cracks of magical society.

Everyone here was *terrified* of him. And they were *angry* about it.

Hmm... what was the best solution here? Dazai usually had plenty of time to consider his schemes. And then when he executed them, it would be done methodically and, often, from the shadows. Now, Dazai would have to do so on the fly with a sizable audience. Mori would call it a good challenge. Dazai would call it annoying.

Deciding on his plan of action, Dazai gave the crowd a rigid smile. "There is no monster here to defeat, Lockhart. Why don't you defeat You-Know-Who and write a book on that instead?" Dazai asked coyly. At the last second, he remembered to change Voldemort's name to its censored version. Even with the switch, however, quite a few faces in the audience flinched back as though struck. "That must be more interesting to your readers than you beating up a twelve-year-old child."

Lockhart's smile was beginning to look more like a grimace. Good. "Nonsense! That vile man lives no longer. The only monster here is you."

Dazai bristled minutely. *Voldemort no longer?* Then whose face had he glared down just a few months earlier? Keeping his cool demeanor, Dazai raised his hands in a placating gesture. "Consider it, is all I mean. Anyway, I'm more likely to kill myself than you are to defeat me. Let's just call it a draw from the outset."

For just a second, Dazai saw Lockhart's eyes narrow like the man was trying to figure him out. However, it was replaced not a second after by another of his shining, fatuous smirks. "You shouldn't lie about such things," he said with a scolding tongue.

Taking a step forward, Lockhart approached Dazai.

He couldn't help the way his body tensed up in anticipation. But he still made sure to keep his expression flat.

The author came to a stop just a step away then, without indication, dropped his hand down onto Dazai's shoulder. He pulled Dazai, pressing the boy tightly into his side. The discomfort and disgust must have been palpable on Dazai's face, because a moment later Lockhart lauded, "That's it! That's the front-page photograph right there. Make sure to snap a couple—I can use one for the book cover once its finished."

There was a flash of light, and the sound of a camera shuttering from somewhere within in the crowd.

Lockhart's hand was on his shoulder, pressing near his neck. And half the man's body was poking into him. Dazai wanted to stay rational—to grin and bear it. But the only thing he could think was *get off get off get off!* Followed by the burning feeling of tar in the back of his throat. Dazai nearly choked on it.

Remembered how Quirrell would do the same thing.

How Mori still did.

Subtly, he tried to pry himself out of Lockhart's grasp, but found he couldn't break free. Lockhart tugged him back to his side immediately.

"Make a scary face for the photo," Lockhart told him. "My fans will eat that up. Like the one in the Daily Prophet articles, if you could."

Another photo taken, and another white flash to accompany it.

"That image is cartoonish," Dazai bit out, largely ignoring Lockhart's demand. Still, Lockhart didn't let up. Dazai felt his skin sting wherever they touched. The man's body caged him in. Dazai's breath spiked, his discomfort rose, and rose, and rose, and—

"Oomph!"

Dazai jammed his elbow into Lockhart's stomach.

He was harsh—not sparing Lockhart any kindness. It connected with a *fhwump!*

Dazai was rewarded a second later when Lockhart stumbled and took a gasping breath for air. He wrapped his arms around his stomach and grunted.

Someone clicked a photo.

Relieved to have the other man off of him, Dazai took a calculated step away. It still burned where they had touched, but the tight band around Dazai's chest finally released.

Almost immediately, he staggered into Fred and George. The twins looked down at him with surprised eyes, looking like they hadn't quite processed the latest string of events yet.

"He attacked me!" Lockhart cried out. "The Demon Student has attempted to kill me as well! Just like poor Quirinus Quirrell!"

A shriek rang out in the crowd and Dazai's head snapped towards it. Lockhart did the same. Whereas Dazai's look was frazzled, Lockhart was the picture of a wounded knight.

"Not to worry, people," he assured. Despite his confident words, however, Lockhart backed away from Dazai with a wary glance. "I won't be defeated so easily. But, *ahem*—" he coughed, again moving closer to the crowd and further from Dazai, "—I believe it would be best to return to the book signing now. Before our Demon Student gets more, *er*, violent."

Dazai watched, with mute curiosity, as Lockhart stumbled back through the crowd before unceremoniously throwing himself onto a chair.

Was he... being serious?

Lockhart waited in patient silence before, after nearly a minute, a young curly-haired boy offered out a book. Lockhart signed it with a flourish.

Slowly, the rest of the crowd began to gather around him, though not without giving Dazai a sharp glance or two first.

Dazai stared.

Had... had this so-called Champion of the People just run away after barely taking one hit?

Disbelief sat thick in Dazai's stomach as he tried to reconcile the boisterous Lockhart from before to the fidgety one now.

Helpless, Dazai looked over his shoulders to see what the Weasley twins thought. They looked just as lost as him. The second their eyes met, however, Fred and George shook from their stupor. Then, mostly to himself, Dazai muttered, "Did he really just give up? It doesn't feel like I won at all..."

Fred hesitated for a second before seeming to come to some conclusion. He gently laid his hand on Dazai's shoulder and gave a light shove. He whispered, "Let's get out of here before Lockhart—"

"Lockfart!"

"—Lockfart, thank you George, decides he wants to start up round two."

Dazai glanced between them as he let them drag him away from the crowd. "I need to buy my books," he reminded the twins before they could take him too far.

"Maybe come back another day?" George tried.

Dazai was quick to disagree. With the number of photographers present today, his face would be even more widely known tomorrow.

Fred sighed. "Let's be quick. I don't like the way those snotty fans were looking at you."

After that, they worked to quickly and quietly collect all of Dazai's books. It was surprisingly easy to avoid the harsh glares of the other patrons—but not without reason. They were clearly avoiding him. When Dazai turned down an aisle, he abruptly found the lane emptied of people within seconds. It didn't bother him, but the twins grew more distressed with each and every aisle.

Plucking *The Biology of Magic* from the shelf, he tried to console them. "You two are overreacting."

The twins huffed, evidently in disagreement over the topic. They read over Dazai's booklist before pulling a face.

"What?"

"Lockhart's books are the only thing left," George explained, a furrow in his brow.

"Want us to sneak up front and grab them?" Fred offered.

At their hesitance, Dazai remembered that Lockhart's books were only at the front of the shop by the man himself. Dazai considered accepting their offer. It would keep him out of the crowd and stop Lockhart from starting anything up again. But...

An idea flashed in Dazai's head.

"I have a better plan," he said, grinning.

Fred and George blinked. Then, twin smirks grew across their lips as well. "That's an impish grin if we've ever seen one. What are you thinking, Boss?"

"I'm thinking," Dazai said, striding across the store floor towards the front, "I want Lockhart to sign my books."

The twins snorted. Though clearly amused with the idea, they sobered up quickly.

"Is that a smart idea?"

“Yeah,” Fred sniffed. “I’m all for bullying Lockhart, but he has a whole mob backing him up.”

Lockhart definitely didn’t seem to have any qualms about threatening a child. But, from Dazai’s perspective, very few people did. Lockhart wasn’t special in that regard—just look at Quirrell! And even though Dazai loathed butting through crowds, he knew there were other considerations to take into account.

Namely: the Malfoy family.

Mori had said to make a good impression. Running and hiding from that sparkly, blonde narcissist wasn’t a good impression by a long shot. It said: Port Mafia is a bunch of *good-for-nothing cowards.*

He might as well consider the mission failed now.

Mori had also said that fear was a good motivator. And, certainly, everyone currently in Flourish and Blotts was absolutely *petrified* of Dazai. Even Lockhart, it seemed. And Dazai could work with that.

Dazai wanted—*needed* the last word.

The twins must have noticed something in his expression, because they didn’t protest further. Instead, they just hovered over his shoulders. It was a familiar feeling, to have Fred and George within reach again.

Dazai walked to the front, ignoring how the crowd backed away from him. As he walked, he snatched some of Lockhart’s books from the surrounding tables. The twins did the same, dropping them into Dazai’s open arms after.

People moved aside. Some flinched as he approached. Wide, fearful eyes followed him.

Then, Dazai came to an abrupt halt.

Lockhart was sitting behind a long, white table. There was an open book in front of him with half a signature across it, as though Dazai had chased a customer away mid-signing.

A dangerous smirk flew across Dazai’s lips.

Lockhart’s mouth fell open.

Someone snapped a photo.

Without ceremony, Dazai dropped his entire stack of books with a woody *smack!* A few people flinched at the sound—including Lockhart. Dazai took no small amount of pleasure in seeing this.

“Could you sign these for me, please?” He said sweetly.

Lockhart's brows rose all the way to his hairline. He coughed to clear his throat before pasting a charming smile across his face. His teeth gleamed white. "Come to taunt me, Demon?"

Dazai held his smile in place. Having instigated this conversation himself, he felt much more in control. No more was he caught off guard by the dozens of eyes boring holes into him. "I've come to get my books signed by the man who's going to kill me," he said the words like they were the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard. And they kind of were. Dazai leaned forward, bracing his palms against the table. He spoke just low enough for only Lockhart to hear, "Keep your enemies close, right?"

Fear, Dazai's eyes said. *You should fear me.*

A hush fell across the crowd.

Lockhart met Dazai's eyes with two wide ones of his own. His brows seemed to raise even higher and higher. Dazai didn't relent, not stepping back even when he was practically nose-to-nose with the man.

"A-asking like this is awfully rude. Though I suppose we can't expect better from a mindless killer." Lockhart said. One of his hands found the quill, forgotten, on the table. With his other hand, he opened to the first page of one of the books.

The quill tip poked into paper, then spelled out a large and loopy *"Lockhart"*.

Dazai finally leaned away with a satisfied nod. "Thanks. The other ones too, if you wouldn't mind."

Lockhart's head snapped up to glare, but at the last minute he remembered his audience and stopped himself. Instead, a tight—but otherwise charming—smile filled his face. "Of course. Anything for a fan."

Dazai watched as Lockhart signed one book, then the next.

The entire bookstore was dead silent. A tense air seemed to surround them. The crowd was stiff and unmoving, as if expecting either Dazai or Lockhart to attack the other at any moment.

Dazai smiled a toothy thing, and Lockhart did as he was told.

As Lockhart finished signing the final book, neither had done any more than to simply smile. Boldly written across the cover page of *Break with a Banshee,* Lockhart was writing a swirling, *"To my latest victory in a long line of truly impressive victories. May your defeat be as devastating for you as it is triumphant for me—Lockhart."*

The book cover snapped shut.

Dazai placed his hand on the book, then slid it to himself. He added it to the stack and hauled the entire thing into his arms. It was heavy, but Dazai didn't let that show on his face. Instead, he gave Lockhart a fox-like smile.

“Thank you,” he grinned.

Lockhart’s beatific smile looked a little strained, which only made Dazai’s grin widen cheekily.

Dazai stepped away, content with how the interaction had resolved. Purposefully, he walked to the front desk to pay for his books. The worker there shakily rang him up. Dazai was very aware that every eye in the shop was on him now, carefully watching his every move.

As he placed a calculated handful of sickles and galleons on the desk, Dazai caught Lucius’ eye over the crowd.

The blonde stared back at him, expression perfectly blank except for a thoughtful press of his lips. Dazai smirked, but otherwise didn’t gesture to the man. He didn’t want to call too much attention to their relationship for now. In the meantime—

“Y-your books, s-sir?” The cashier said. She didn’t seem to know how to address him, Dazai thought with amusement.

He collected the books from her. Now, they were nicely tied together and bagged for easier carry. Dazai hauled them into his arms, then turned to leave.

Although he was a little forlorn at not being able to hang out with the twins any longer, Dazai knew it was for the best. Tensions were high in Flourish and Blotts right now, and Dazai was already Public Enemy #1. The Weasley’s didn’t need to be dragged into that anymore than they already would be.

Thinking this, Dazai walked straight out the exit. Draco and the twins would have to finish shopping on their lonesome, it seemed.

He supposed ice cream would have to wait.

“That’s right! Begone from here!” Lockhart called from behind him.

A second of prolonged silence passed.

Then, the crowd started to jeer with him.

Dazai merely raised his hand in a casual goodbye. “See you in class, Professor.”

A bell on the door jingled as it shut.

Quiet.

The wind brushed Dazai’s hair back gently. His bag swayed in the breeze.

The streets of Diagon Alley held none of the tension inside Flourish and Blotts.

Unknowing to what had just transpired, pedestrians casually chatted and shopped. Dazai eyed them, as if expecting someone to recognize him any second now. But after a few seconds, the

peaceful air of the streets did nothing but hum with faint magic.

Dazai let out a breath.

Now would be a good time to scurry back to the Leaky Cauldron. Now—before any of those photographers could rush to publish their stories. Once Dazai's face was plastered across the news, Diagon Alley could become too hostile to traverse.

But first...

Dazai looked down at his unoccupied hand. He flipped it over, inspecting the exposed palm mutely. No Longer Human seemed to buzz beneath his skin and boil in his blood.

There was something else he needed to buy, first.

-

Tom had a problem.

For once, his problem wasn't the rowdy drunkard at the bar, nor the snooty wizards currently making an unapologetic mess of rooms six through nine, nor the mysterious owl that kept leaving dead mice on his doorstep. No, all of that was too straightforward to really be a problem at this point.

The problem was that the twelve-year-old boy staying in room number four was a murderer.

Tom had had his fair share of unusual and dangerous customers in the past. Running the Leaky Cauldron for as many years as he had, it was inevitable. During the height of the Wizarding War, sketchy people passed through nearly every day. Tom was used to witnessing danger in passing. He played unobtrusive host when he could manage, and evictor when he had to. Tom knew what he was doing, and he always knew where to draw the line.

But something about Dazai Osamu was different.

Eyeing the newsstand near the wall, Tom sighed.

"What're you sighing about?" A particular customer at the bar slurred, leaning over their ale, heavy. "If I w're surrounded by alcohol all day, I'd never be sad."

Tom raised a brow. "If you were surrounded by alcohol all day, you would never get anything done."

"Well..." They waved a hand, then tucked their long, dark hair behind an ear self-consciously. "I wouldn't get anything done, anyway. S'not in my nature."

“You can’t be drinking so early in the day, Florence,” Tom interrupted, despite having been the one to serve them.

As if fearing the worst, they wrapped a hand around their drink and hugged it protectively to their chest. “Spell of de-intoxicating,” Florence grumbled.

“When you finally invent such a spell,” Tom said sternly, “you’ll be famous. In the meantime, you’ll just be going into work slurring all your words.”

“Ha! As if the Daily Prophet notices the difference,” they cackled. “All the big boss cares about is those fancy journalists upstairs. I doubt the boss even remembers us lowly workers in the archive. It’s all Demon Student this, Demon Student that these days...”

Tom sniffed.

Without a word, he turned away to collect an empty plate from another group of customers. They gave him their thanks, then left for Diagon Alley. When Tom returned his attention to Florence, the patron was taking another long swig of ale.

“Slow down,” Tom said, earning a glare from Florence. “You’ll hurt yourself walking out of here.”

Florence grumbled into their ale. “Get me another drink an’ I’ll think about it.”

Tom raised a brow as Florence immediately went back to nursing their drink. He reached for an empty plate and began to wash it instead of humoring them with a response. A few crumbs clattered into the sink below before water could wash them away. He mindlessly scrubbed the dish.

Tom’s mind slipped back to the problem at hand.

Dazai Osamu was out now, evidentially confident traversing Diagon Alley on his lonesome. For the first time since Dazai arrived at the Leaky Cauldron, he was out of his room. At first, Tom had thought he would be worried about such a thing.

The Demon Student roaming Diagon Alley freely? Horrifying!

But instead, all he felt was *confused.*

Because the Daily Prophet had “Demon Student” smeared across what must have been a hundred different papers since last February. Hysteria buzzed around the inn for months following the first article. Even just a few feet to his right, today’s paper proclaimed much the same. Having a position so central to wizarding student life, Tom had thoroughly read every one of those papers.

And there was no doubt about it, reading them. Tom knew—*everyone* knew: Dazai Osamu was a monster.

But.

Then Dazai had stumbled into his shop, friendly smile on his lips and a too-heavy load in his hands. The boy had quietly requested a room. He had gawked over Tom's wandless magic and had played keep-away with a feisty owl.

It could have all been a facade, Tom knew. The papers had certainly speculated as much about the boy—that he was some sort of deceptive, two-faced wolf in sheep's clothing.

But—

Tom couldn't forget the way Dazai had frozen up reading the Daily Prophet article. Or how his fingers had tensed up over the paper, crinkling up the edges under white knuckles. Dazai had looked almost surprised to see the news there. Then, with shoulders pulled back and smile gone brittle, the kid seemed to be physically walling himself off.

As if *Tom* was the threat there, not himself.

Perhaps it wasn't fair to say that Tom's latest problem was the murderer living in his inn.

No, Tom would be lying if he said that.

The *problem* was that the twelve-year-old murderer staying in his inn was holding himself up in his room, and Tom was *concerned*.

Concerned. About a murderer. One who, for all accounts, was being slandered to hell and back in the papers. Tom should have no sympathy for someone like that. But here he was, cleaning a plate behind the bar and thinking just that.

Self-defense, the kid had said, even though the media was saying the exact opposite.

He was just a kid—so sue Tom for being a little worried.

Tom's gaze traveled back to Florence. They had emptied their ale and were now looking rather forlornly at a mostly empty coin-pouch. Tom frowned and fidgeted with the edge of the plate for a second before deciding to voice his thoughts aloud.

"Florence," he called.

They jerked up after a sluggish second. *"Hm?"*

"You work at the Daily Prophet," he started, parsing out his words carefully. "Do the journalists ever..."

Florence raised a brow and rested their head on a hand.

Tom took a deep breath.

"Do they ever just... make things up? To write about, I mean."

Florence stared at him for a long moment.

The wall clock ticked.

Ticked.

Ticked.

Suddenly, Florence burst into cackling laughter.

Tom jumped.

“What kinda question is that, Tom?”

“A thoughtful one,” he said with a huff.

Again, Florence laughed. They spun their hand in a loose, drunken gesture. “I just work in the archives. You know that. No place for a drunkard like me upstairs. Can’t see straight enough to write even a sentence.”

Tom carefully ignored the remark, knowing Florence’s early drinking habits were at least half his own fault. Quickly moving on, he asked, “Do they keep records of all the old stories down there?” He paused. Then, remembering Dazai’s request the other day, he added a hesitant, “Ones about the Demon Student?”

“Sure, probably.” Florence reached for their ale, lifted it to drink, then pouted when nothing came out. “All the published and unpublished stories go down there to collect dust. We all like to pile up the boxes and nap on them.”

At least they could admit to it, Tom thought wryly. He shook his head.

He opened his mouth to ask something more, when the sound of bricks shifting suddenly tore his attention away.

The wall to Diagon Alley creaked as the bricks moved open. On the other side, Diagon Alley came into view, looking busier than it usually was at this time of day. *Lockhart’s signing,* Tom recalled with a frown. He wasn’t fond of the man’s flowery language, but enough of his customers waxed poetic about the author for Tom to understand the buzz. But it wasn’t the crowd that snatched Tom’s attention.

Dazai Osamu hurried through the door.

A stack of books in his arms indicated he’d just been at the Lockhart signing himself. Tom also noted that Dazai was wearing a sleek pair of black gloves. They must have been new as well, as Tom hadn’t noticed them earlier that morning.

Despite the boy’s seemingly ordinary purchases, there was nothing casual about his entrance. Tom thought he looked to be in a rush. Dazai beelined directly towards his room without even glancing in the bar’s direction. His shoes pounded against the floor.

“Kid!” Tom called before he could stop himself.

Dazai slammed to a stop, eyes snapping at Tom instantly. For just a second, the boy's eyes were wide and his lips parted, as if expecting something. Then, his expression abruptly shuttered closed. A calm look washed over him.

"Tom. I was just heading back to my room."

"I can see that," Tom said, speaking slowly. He thought about the hunted look in Dazai's eyes, then asked, "Can I... offer you some lunch?"

Tom watched his expression closely, but all Dazai did was blink a few times as he registered the question. "No thank you," he said, curt. Then, he blinked, a small twinkle in his eyes that had Tom briefly staggering. *"Oh!* Was I too noisy? Are you actually going to kill me?"

"What?! No!"

Dazai huffed, looking at once disappointed. Tom was baffled.

Apparently dissatisfied, Dazai turned on his heel to start walking again. Again, before he could, Tom said, "It's just, you haven't come out for anything to eat since you got here. And, w-well... it's on the house? Since you're staying here alone, and all."

And again, Dazai stopped dead in his tracks. He stared straight at Tom, a confused press now between his brows. Tom silently cursed himself. From Dazai's perspective, it must seem like Tom was doing a complete 180°. But in reality, the innkeeper had been thinking about the Demon Student's predicament for days now. This morning's encounter had only hastened his uncertainty. Still, there must have been a more tactful way to offer Dazai a tentative olive branch.

"Hey, if the kid gets free meal, can I get free ale?"

Both Tom and Dazai's attention snapped to Florence.

They smiled crookedly at the barkeep.

Dazai seemed to relax a little at Florence's interjection, Tom noted with relief. Something about the drunk's lack-of-class must have put him at ease.

The boy raised a brow. "Isn't it a bit early to be drinking?"

Florence huffed. "What, are you and Tom sharing notes? I don't want an intervention."

"If you drink too much, then you might trip and crack your skull open on the way to work," Dazai told them.

Florence choked on their spit.

Equally flabbergasted, Tom coughed into his fist.

"Charming, kid." Florence recovered first. "Real charming. I'll need another drink to forget such cruel words."

Tom shot them a glare before turning back to Dazai, who merely shrugged. “It’s on the house,” Tom reiterated. When Dazai didn’t react except to watch him, he plowed onward, “An apology for my being a little, *er*... harsh the other day. I realize now that I may have jumped to a few conclusions.”

Please don’t take offense, Tom thought frantically, I’m terrified of you but also worried about you and—why can’t you actually look as scary as the Daily Prophet makes you out to be?!

Dazai’s outward expression didn’t change, but Tom got the impression that the boy was scrutinizing him. The bartender couldn’t help but feel like the assessment was warranted. For a second, Tom thought Dazai would agree.

But after a pause, the boy shook his head.

“No thank you.”

Tom deflated. It seemed his young charge wouldn’t be budging today. The air left his lungs in one big, heaving sigh.

Relief, or defeat. Tom wasn’t sure himself.

“But,” Dazai said before turning on his heel to retreat to his room, “consider yourself forgiven. I suppose it can’t be helped, if the Daily Prophet...”

Dazai trailed off. With a surreptitious glance to the other patrons, Tom understood why. He didn’t want it getting out any more than Dazai did that the Demon Student was currently rooming here.

Dazai was fast, already half-way to his room when Tom called, “I’ll bring you some supper tonight—” and the door slammed shut. “—if you want.” He sighed. “Or not.”

The bar room was quiet for a moment.

Tom pinched the bridge of his nose, wondering just what sort of mess he was getting into. Just a week earlier, he would have told you the Demon Student was some half-mad serial-killer in the making. But now having actually spoken to the boy? Tom couldn’t say *anything* with confidence. Hell, he couldn’t even say the main source of magical news, The Daily Prophet, was reliable now.

All because of one twelve-year-old's pouting, bandaged face.

...Maybe he was getting soft in his old age.

“The Daily Prophet, *hmm?”*

Tom opened his eyes to see Florence, sloppy grin crossing their face.

They lifted their drink, tilting it towards where Dazai had swiftly disappeared to. “Your sudden interest in my job wouldn’t have anything to do with that kid, would it?”

Tom stole the empty drink right out from their fingers. Florence squeaked and made frantic, grabbing motions to get it back. The barkeep didn't relent. "You're surprisingly astute for someone so drunk."

"It's a talent—will you refill that, now?" Florence keened.

Tom glanced to the glass, then back to Florence. An idea tickled the back of his mind. "You don't have the coin."

"Er—I can pay you back?"

"Perhaps," Tom started, slowly parsing out his idea as he spoke, "we can work out an alternative method of payment."

Florence blinked once, then twice. They looked Tom up and down with slow eyes.

"Get me the archive copies of the Demon Student stories." With pink cheeks, Tom hastily added, "in exchange for a free drink."

The proposition hung in the air for a long moment.

Then, "just one drink?"

"Two, if you can get it by tomorrow."

"Ah," Florence sniffed. "Two's too good to pass up. Doubt the boss'll even notice one or two stacks missing, anyway."

Tom let out a breath, then nodded. "Then it's a deal." More quietly, he added, "Thanks, Flor."

Florence waved him off. They looked to the glass, which Tom had started to unconsciously wipe clean, before seeming to sober up some. "The Demon Student, *huh?"* Florence muttered, eyes shooting to the inn hallway thoughtfully. Tom followed their gaze and held his breath. "Wonder what's got you suddenly interested in a story like that."

"Just a thought," Tom told them. "Aren't you going to be late for work?"

Florence grumbled. "I'm already late for work," they puffed, shooting a glance to the wall clock. "But I guess I can get there now, since there's ale on the line."

Florence stood, hands bracing on the bar top for stability. Tom took pity on them.

"Here," he retrieved a chocolate bar from under the bar and slid it across the table. "Shouldn't let your drink sit on an empty stomach. Now get out."

"Aye, aye," Florence huffed. They snatched the candy off the table before clumsily sulking to the brick wall. A sloppy wave of their wand opened the door. Florence slipped into Diagon Alley with all the poise of a drunken goose.

Tom watched as the brick door closed back shut. Once it was sealed, he turned back to his work behind the bar. Although his eyes naturally came to spy down at Room Four, he didn't let them rest there long. There was a sour feeling in Tom's gut. Hopefully Florence's bounty, when they returned, would clear things up. But until then, cleaning dishes and tables would have to keep Tom occupied.

Whatever was really going with the Demon Student, Tom hoped the answers would be satisfying. Somehow, he didn't think that would be the case.

-

The curtains were pulled tightly closed and the room was pitch black. A pile of half-read textbooks sat scattered at the edge of the bed, cast aside when Dazai's eyes had started to ache. Only Lockhart's books remained entirely untouched. Dazai had skimmed the first few chapters of *Break with a Banshee* only to stop there. It had become immediately clear that it wasn't really a textbook, so much as a list of reasons why Lockhart thought he was amazing.

Speaking of Lockart, Dazai now had an official declaration of war hanging over his head. He wondered if he could just ignore it. Lockhart didn't exactly seem like the capable type. Moreover, the man had practically shook in his boots every time Dazai talked back to him. Still, it was just one more thing to deal with on top of all of Mori's nonsense.

This year was already shaping up to be a catastrophe. In spite of this, Dazai couldn't find himself entirely dreading it. His gang would be waiting for him there. Meeting the twins at Flourish and Blotts had only reignited the warm flame in Dazai's chest. It was entirely unlike the cold, sterile world of Mori's office.

Dazai flipped over in bed. He buried his head beneath the quilt.

You know attachments like that, Mori's words echoed in his head unbidden, *have no place within the Port Mafia.*

Mori hadn't said the next bit, but Dazai's brain filled in the blanks automatically:

If you don't belong in the Port Mafia, you'd be better off dead—

"Hoot!"

Dazai jerked out of his thoughts.

"Hoot!"

Featherbrain suddenly shook the room with another bellowing *hoot!*

There was a ruffle of wings in the air followed abruptly by sharp talons digging into Dazai's shoulder.

“Hey!” Dazai squawked, pushing himself upright and toppling Featherbrain off of him. “What’s that for?”

Featherbrain didn’t look at all told off, and she hooted again.

Dazai scowled. “I was only thinking,” he grumbled, suddenly feeling trapped under those intelligent owl eyes. “Don’t you have better things to do than attacking me?”

Unsurprisingly, Featherbrain’s responding hoots were entirely nonsensical.

Dazai ignored her, now, in favor of sitting up. He ran a hand over his face in some vain attempt to wipe away the dark thoughts there.

Evidentially pleased, Featherbrain hopped off the bed. Dazai didn’t turn to watch her go, too busy rubbing his eyes.

Blindly, Dazai reached around the bed. It was a few seconds before his hand found purchase on what he was searching for. He pulled the phone to his ear, dialing the only number saved without having to look. Dazai carefully kept his eyes closed against the item’s harsh mechanical light.

The phone line clicked.

“You didn’t call yesterday,” was Mori’s greeting.

Dazai frowned. He squinted at the phone. The white light blinded him for a second before clearing up: it was almost noon the next day. He hummed. “I’ve been busy.”

He had been busy lying in bed and staring up at the dark ceiling, losing track of time.

But Mori didn’t need the specifics.

“How did you meeting with Lucius go?” Mori asked, straight to the point.

“Fine.” He hesitated. “He brought his family.”

Mori hummed, seeming to consider the information. “And? What did you learn?”

Dazai paused, remembering all the Malfoy family interactions he’d seen yesterday. Between their meeting in front of the bank to their departure in Flourish and Blotts, Dazai thought he had a fairly good picture of the family’s inner politics. “Lucius is definitely the one you want to impress. If he gives an order, the others will follow.” He recalled how quick Lucius had been able to shut down with wife and child when he wanted to. “The wife, Narcissa, seems to just be going along with Lucius’ plans, but she has a soft spot for Draco—” he corrected himself, “—her son.”

Static buzzed over the line as Mori considered the information. “What of young Draco?”

Dazai bristled, but carefully kept his voice level. “They don’t tell him anything. I’d say they don’t trust him, but I think it’s more likely Narcissa just doesn’t want him involved with the

Port Mafia any more than necessary."

"That will make him easier to manipulate," Mori said, sounding impartial.

"He's already loyal to me. I won't need to push too hard for him to trust me more than his own family."

Mori chuckled. "It seems those cute little friendships of yours aren't entirely useless after all. Good work, Dazai."

Dazai twitched at the praise. He was quick to push past it. "You said Lucius might try to test me," he prompted.

"That's right. As far as I'm aware, the pieces of your test are already in motion. Take care of it quickly. The sooner Lucius bows to the Port Mafia, the sooner we can move on to more important things." Mori's voice had gone entirely clinical. From the other end of the line, Dazai could hear papers rustling around.

"Consider it done."

"Good boy," Mori purred into the microphone. Dazai could practically feel the man's words through the line—a too-gentle caress of nail over his wrists. Gooseflesh. "Now, I have some important work to take care of. Try not to kill yourself in the meantime."

Dazai opened his mouth to respond.

Click.

The line had already gone dead.

Dazai's tongue was dry and cold in his mouth. He pressed his lips firmly together before discarding the phone with a flick of his wrist. It landed with a *smack* against the wood floor.

Featherbrain dropped one of her dead mice by Dazai's feet.

He eyed her for a long, long moment.

There weren't mice in the Port Mafia headquarters. The entire building, from its penthouse suite to its midnight black basements were sterile and full of a clean, well-intentioned malice. Even the dog kennels, which Dazai had always found to be near squalor, were actually quite well-kept. Something about the Port Mafia being so pristine had always made Dazai pause. It caught in his breath and held his lungs still until he wasn't sure if he'd be breathing much longer.

The Port Mafia shouldn't be clean, he'd always thought. That building and everyone in it was drenched in blood. The torture rooms were splattered with red day-in and day-out, but they were somehow the cleanest rooms in the whole of Yokohama. The only places in the whole world where people told nothing but the honest truth.

Then those people would always die. And Dazai knew nothing was more honest than death.

There were no rodents in the Port Mafia, but there were mice in London. There was a sly rat named Angel that wandered around Hogwarts half of every year. There were a dozen dead mice at the foot of Dazai's borrowed bed.

The contradiction burned like nothing else in the world.

Lucius was a rodent, Dazai knew. Someone who would burrow a million little homes and keep every single one for himself. But a mouse could always be drawn out of their hole with cheese. All Dazai needed to do was to supply the metal spring trap—and to find out what was sweet enough to Lucius to entice him out. The man was conniving and immoral, but he wasn't hospital-clean like Mori was.

Knock—knock—knock—!

Dazai barely shifted away from his thoughts. He angled his right ear towards the noise, but otherwise didn't react. By his feet, Featherbrain let out an eager-sounding tweet. Again, Dazai barely reacted to it.

A rodent was entirely unclean to the core. Unclean and inhuman, just like—

Don't kill yourself, Mori had said.

Knock—knock—!!

The knocking picked back up.

"Er, D-Dazai?" A voice called through the wood, subdued. It sounded as though the speaker was trying to keep their voice low. "It's Tom. Can I come in?"

Dazai blinked out of his head, slowly shifting to face the door.

"Only for a minute. I just don't think you'd want to talk out in the hall," Tom reassured quickly. There was a sound as if Tom were shifting something heavy in his hands. Curiosity prickled at Dazai's chest. "Are you awake?"

For another second, Dazai merely stared blankly ahead.

Then, he shook himself. Featherbrain must have noticed his change in demeanor, because the owl took to the air abruptly. She swooped across the room and onto the window sill to watch with sparkling eyes. Dazai sighed at her antics before pushing himself to his feet.

"I'm awake."

"Ah, good!" Tom said, sounding relieved. "Can I come in?"

Dazai ran a hand across his face.

As he walked to the door, he quickly snatched his new pair of gloves from the bedside table and pulled them on. They were a pair of black, dragon-skin gloves he had bought at Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions yesterday. They had been a last-minute decision, but a

smart one, nonetheless. Sleek and strong, they wrapped No Longer Human up and prevented the ability from lashing out unexpectedly on passerbys.

Dazai gripped a gloved hand around the door knob and carefully pried it open by just an inch. He peeked a single, chocolate eye out of the crack.

Tom was just on the other side of the door, looking back-and-forth as if expecting someone to interrupt them. Dazai tried to make out a reason for the man to bother him now, but couldn't find one.

"Tom," he said, snapping the bartender's attention to him. "To what do I owe the pleasure? If you've come to kill me, now is a good time, actually. I just had the most awful conversation I'd like to forget."

There was a pause. An extended pause.

"Um. Can you let me in?" Tom asked eventually. "I have something for you."

Dazai frowned. He strained to see what Tom was holding, but their positions didn't allow for it. He thought the problem over for a second. What was the worst that could happen, letting Tom in? If the man really was a threat, Dazai would just have to stab him the same way he had Quirrell. It would be an unfortunate issue to deal with later, but Dazai would manage.

Or. Well. He could just let Tom kill him.

Thinking this, he nodded. He stepped back and, with little flourish, swung the door open wider.

"Ah, thanks, kid," Tom said, stepping through the door. Dazai shut it behind him.

"The room is a bit of a mess," Dazai said, words apologetic but tone anything but, "I'll make sure Featherbrain cleans it up before we leave."

Dazai didn't catch Tom's expression as he walked across the room, but the bartender did pause to consider those words. "Featherbrain?" He dropped something heavy down on the corner of Dazai's bed, then looked up. *"Oh.* Your owl?"

Dazai hummed. From her perch, Featherbrain hooted a kind greeting.

Dazai waited a second by the door, pausing and assessing. However, it became clear abruptly that Tom wasn't about to whirl around and attack him. Dazai wasn't sure whether to feel relief or annoyance at that fact. But, momentarily assured of it, Dazai padded across the room to peer around Tom's shoulder.

The thing Tom had dropped on his bed was a stack of twine-wound newspapers. Garnished atop it was a plate of scrambled eggs and toast. It was a heaping serving. At least enough for five people.

Dazai's curiosity won out over trepidation. He walked past Tom to squint down at the articles.

It was a challenge with the lack of light, something that Tom also seemed to notice. The bartender made a gruff sound before carefully walking himself through the darkness towards the window.

The first paper on the stack wasn't bound like the others. Instead, it seemed to have been added to the top almost as an afterthought. After a second, Dazai realized why: it was freshly printed and dated that morning. Bold, capital letters were printed across the top, spelling out both Dazai's name and Lockhart's. Below that was a familiar scene from Flourish and Blotts. Dazai's own image grinned devilishly back up at him.

"The story broke this morning," Tom said, voice unsure. "Your face is all over Diagon Alley by now."

Dazai sighed. It wasn't like he hadn't known this was coming. Still, it was an unfortunate turn of events regardless. Unwilling to dwell on it long, however, Dazai moved to the other stack.

THE DEMON STUDENT IS COMING FOR YOUR CHILD NEXT! the top paper read.

The cover photo was that of a chubby-cheeked, crying child. Dazai frowned down at the blatantly false reporting. He noted with some aplomb, however, that the photo had not stopped silently sobbing yet. The animation spell was still fully intact.

Gloved hands couldn't nullify spells. Good to know.

"It's real nice out today, kid. You should open the windows. Let me—" Tom cut off abruptly before even reaching the window. "Is that a pile of dead mice?"

Dazai jerked out of his readings. His head snapped up to where Tom had frozen in place. "Gifts from Featherbrain," he informed plainly before turning back to the papers. Ineffectually, Dazai tried to rip off the twine bindings. It was too tightly bound for him to make progress. His wand was probably sharp enough to cut through...

Suddenly, Tom bellowed out a laugh. Dazai once again jumped out of his contemplation to stare wide-eyed the barkeep's way.

Tom apologized for startling him with a wave of his hand. "I had wondered whose owl was leaving those! It's you, isn't it, lovely lady?"

Featherbrain cooed when Tom gently scratched her beak. She preened under the attention, then obligingly hopped away so Tom could peel open the curtains.

Immediately, light poured into the room. The whole room bled white.

Dazai closed his eyes to brace against the blinding change.

"Sorry!"

"She left you mice, too?" Dazai asked instead of amusing the man's apology. He pried his eyes back open but scowled at the bleached spots that still lingered in his vision.

Tom grunted and lifted the window open. A gust of fresh-smelling air gently ruffled Featherbrain's wings.

"Sure did." He glanced back to Dazai.

Dazai felt his face go blank on impulse. Still, Tom must have seen something, because he calmly tacked on, "no harm done. Some owls are like that—giving gifts to say *thank you* or *I care about you*."

"She's just being annoying. You'd know if you met her for more than a minute. *Obnoxious* is her defining character trait" Dazai countered without pause. He looked around for his wand, wondering where he'd ended up tossing it to. Finally, he spotted it rolled over next to one of Lockhart's worthless books.

Tom kept his distance, hands tucked behind his back non-threateningly. When Dazai picked up his wand, however, the barkeep instantly went tense. His hands twitched behind him. Dazai glanced at him—from his sweating brow to his shoulders held stiff. It seemed he still held some trepidation, after all.

Dazai didn't comment, merely raised a brow and made a show of slicing the twine with the sharp point of his wand. The bindings fell apart over his bed. Dazai discarded his wand by it, and Tom let out a sigh of relief immediately.

HOGWART'S STUDENTS TELL ALL! FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS OF THE DEMON STUDENT, the next article read.

Dazai quickly skimmed through the page. He didn't immediately recognize the names of the students Skeeter had interviewed, though most of them seemed to be other Slytherins. Dazai caught the name "Pansy Parkinson" near the end of the article and nearly laughed.

"Dazai is really bad news. I've been telling everyone that for ages," Pansy had told Skeeter, who in turn had carefully penned it into this Daily Prophet article, *"Did you know he's awful at magic? I hope the professors don't welcome him back for a second year."*

HOW TO TELL IF YOUR CLASSMATE IS POSSESSED BY A DEMON. read the next article. The one after, *IS DAZAI OSAMU POSSESSED BY A DEMON?*

Dazai's nose scrunched up as he flipped from one article to the next.

"What is all this?" Dazai thought aloud.

Tom answered. "The other day, you mentioned wanting to read all the articles about yourself. I had a... friend get them."

Dazai set another article aside, then scowled at one titled, *THE COLD-BLOODED KILLER NEXT DOOR!*

This was...

This was all hysterical nonsense!

Not even one of these articles was slightly based in fact. The words “self-defense” never once appeared in the entire stack of newspapers even in theory. Let alone “Voldemort” or “Death-Eaters.” The closest Dazai found was one article speculating he was a fan of “You-Know-Who.” The articles spanned across multiple months, and every single one was topped with the name Rita Skeeter. Finally, he came to the first paper in the pile: *THE SECRET BEHIND DAZAI OSAMU’S MUREROUS RAMPAGE!*

He blinked down at the date.

“This is dated from May.”

Tom cleared his throat, drawing Dazai’s gaze. “That’s all I was able to get,” he explained, “for now. Florence will probably grab the earlier ones if I ask nicely.”

Florence... Dazai couldn’t recall having ever heard that name. “Who? Your friend?”

“Right, I never formally introduced the two o’ you.” Tom didn’t sound even slightly apologetic. If anything, Dazai thought he sounded sheepish at how the conversation was turning. “Florence is the drunk you met yesterday. Long, dark hair? Slurring all their words?”

Dazai nodded.

“They work for the Daily Prophet. I asked ‘em to grab the old Demon Student articles for me.” Tom scratched the nape of his neck. At Dazai’s unblinking look, he sighed. His hand dropped back to his side. “I skimmed through them all. Looking at them in retrospect, the whole thing seems a little silly. But when everyone is saying it, it's real easy to get swept up in the... the *hysteria,* I suppose." He scoffed and shook his head a little. *"Demon possession...”*

Dazai couldn’t agree more. “How does Rita Skeeter get her information?” he asked, rather than dwell on a rising frustration.

Tom frowned. “Not sure. Any other time, I’d have told you ‘interviews and investigations.’ But now...”

“She’s just making things up,” Dazai finished for him. Under his breath, Dazai asked himself the question that had been bugging him ever since he first arrived in the Leaky Cauldron: “Why?”

Because that was the real issue here, wasn’t it?

What did the Daily Prophet stand to gain from demonizing him? From denying that the Death Eaters were on the move again?

Dazai’s eyes narrowed as he considered the conundrum. Someone with a lot of power had made the conscious decision to turn the wizarding world against Dazai. And, despite himself, Dazai didn’t think that obnoxious Rita Skeeter was the big-bad here. When they had met, she had *asked* about the Death Eaters and Voldemort specifically. She had been prepared to actually write about it.

Who was really in control of the Daily Prophet? Dazai asked himself, and what did they stand to gain from all the hysteria they were building?

The expression on his face must have been frightening, because Tom's voice when he next spoke was somewhat shaking.

"I-is it okay? That I brought these?"

Dazai let out a deep breath and forced his expression to something more neutral. He looked to Tom. "Thank you, for this."

Tom seemed to melt with relief at that. Then, growing more sure of himself by the second, he smiled. "I brought you some food as well. Some hearty breakfast food, even if it's a bit later in the day."

Dazai didn't spare the eggs a glance.

Instead, he turned back to the scattered articles around his bed. Dazai began to methodically organize and re-stack them. He thought to re-bind them, but the twine was unfixable now. "Even if it's not true, it's nice to know what people are saying about me," Dazai told the man, tone purposefully subdued. He met Tom's eyes. "Thanks for breakfast."

Tom sobered up upon hearing this. "I can't believe the Daily Prophet would just lie about this. They're the most trusted news source in all of magical society!"

Trusted things could be corrupted, Dazai knew. And anything with that much power would, invariably, have an agenda. Dazai just wanted to know how he fit into it.

On the window sill, Featherbrain swallowed a mouse whole.

Chapter End Notes

for anyone who was wondering: florence is an oc. They are Not important to the plot (don't worry lol). i just felt the tom scene needed another character to bounce off of, so i made someone up. there are a few kind-of obscure HP characters in Year 2, but florence is the only oc. so no worries. this series is and always will be pretty dazai-centric loll

next up: dazai reunites with his gang!

thanks for reading, and thank you for all the lovely comments! I really appreciate it! : D see ya next week!

Reunion

Chapter Summary

Dazai's return to Hogwarts!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once the air between them was cleared, Tom became a surprisingly good host.

Every day, three times a day, the innkeeper knocked on his door to deliver a meal. Dazai accepted every one, though more than half of the meals ended up in Featherbrain's stomach instead.

Tom would start every morning off with the latest Daily Prophet served beside a warm plate of breakfast, which Dazai then considered in the privacy of his room. The articles were only becoming more daring. Skeeter had taken to calling Dazai an "evil, manipulative villain-type." Of course, this left Lockhart to be the people's "hero." Dazai didn't know which moniker was worse.

Tom was insistent that the slander and lies would eventually die down, but with each passing day he grew less sure. The lack of authenticity in the Daily Prophet was a heavy blow to the man. Dazai couldn't relate.

Still. They got on well enough, even if Tom still balked every time Dazai casually mentioned drinking all of the inn's ale and dying of liver poisoning.

When the day finally came for Dazai to leave for Hogwarts, Tom quietly saw him out the side-exit. "If you ever need anything, write," Tom said. "Even if everyone else is against you, I've got your back, kid."

Dazai nodded, already mentally cataloguing what uses he might have for a bartender/innkeeper.

"That reminds me!" Tom said with a snap. "Florence is still digging around the archives—when they're sober enough, that is. If they manage to snag anymore old papers about you, want me to send them your way?"

Though Dazai wasn't sure how much use he would get out of them, he agreed nonetheless. "If you could. Give Florence my thanks."

"'Course!"

Dazai shifted the luggage in his arms. Between books, robes, and Featherbrain, it was no easy feat.

Tom seemed to take his discomfort as indication of the time.

"Well, you'd best be off. Hang in there, kid. It'll get better." He turned to Featherbrain when Dazai merely nodded. "Goodbye to you too, little lady. Take good care of each other, okay?"

Featherbrain cooed happily, and Dazai had to grab the cage tighter to accommodate her shifting around.

"Thank you for your hospitality," Dazai said, curt, but to the point. The looming threat of walking through a bustling crowd had him eager to get moving.

"Off you get, then!" Tom grinned, brushing them off. "Otherwise, you'll miss the train."

Dazai dipped his head in a slight bow. Then, with a final goodbye, he turned from Tom and left the alley.

By the end of things, Dazai thought, Tom hadn't been so bad. The man could be a little overreactive, but he had been helpful overall. So far, Tom had been the only stranger willing to look past Skeeter's outrageous claims. Dazai silently thanked Tom again as he pushed through the London crowd.

Mostly keeping to the edges of the streets, Dazai tried hard to avoid the questioning stares of muggles. But with Featherbrain's constant cacophony of hoots and coos, it was nigh impossible. Dazai was only really able to relax once he'd pushed through the entrance at Platform nine-and-three-quarters.

The magical gateway burned at his skin painfully, but it was still a relief to pass to the other side. Surrounded by other wizards and witches, Dazai's luggage and owl didn't seem nearly as strange. No one gave Dazai a second glance as he beelined directly for the train to Hogwarts.

Still, Dazai was careful to keep his head ducked behind his luggage. The last thing he needed was to be swarmed about being this so-called "Demon Student."

Thinking this, Dazai kept his head low. He boarded the train and jumped into the first empty cabin he saw.

Dazai set Featherbrain's cage down with a *thunk!*

Without further ado, Dazai plopped down into the seat beside her. He took a moment to stare quietly out the window before eventually deciding better of it. It was nice to see the students wandering outside (Dazai would never pass up an opportunity to silently observe his classmates), but he didn't want to risk drawing eyes. The last thing he wanted now was another incident like the one at Flourish and Blotts.

With a sigh, Dazai gripped the pale curtains and swung them closed.

It was inevitable, Dazai knew. Sooner rather than later, he would have to face the music. Skipping his classes to avoid prying eyes wasn't practical, even if it did seem more enjoyable. Professor Snape would hunt him down if he even tried.

Shaking off the unhelpful thoughts, Dazai pulled a book from his luggage and promptly shoved his nose into it. *The Biology of Magic* was proving to be an interesting read. It also helped to keep his mind off of things currently outside his control.

"The impacts and interactions of magic on the human body are constantly under study, although more practical investigations, such as those into curse-breaking and artifact-handling, typically gain more media attention. This does not detract from the importance of study into magical biology.

"For instance, it is an observed quality that the practice of magic can increase an individual's lifespan. Compared to muggles, powerful wizards can expect to live well past 100 years of age (Bates, 1890; Grubb, 1940). Gaunt's (1776) research suggests this lifespan-altering quality may directly correspond to the wizard's Magical Sensitivity (MS)."

Dazai read in silence, a contemplative frown pasted across his face. Magic and special abilities had very similar signatures, Dazai knew, but there wasn't an excess of literature on the topic of abilities. Did ability users also lead longer lives? Did magic interact the same way with their physiology? Perhaps Mori could dissect a few ability users as a test—

"Is this seat—*oh!"*

Dazai was torn from his readings abruptly. His head snapped up to see two girls standing at the compartment door. They weren't changed into their school uniforms yet, but Dazai recognized them as being fellow Slytherin second-years. Millicent Bulstrode, a harsh-looking girl who Dazai thought might enjoy fist-fighting for fun, and Tracey Davis, who wore her eyes and mouth like a hyena's laughing smirk.

Silence lingered in the air. Dazai watched as their eyes grew wider and wider, until he wasn't sure they could look anymore horrified. Then, with a frantic screech, they slammed the compartment door shut.

Dazai blinked at the door.

Faintly, from the other side, he heard hushed shouting, *"Milli, was that who I think it was?!"*

"Th-the Demon Student!"

Damn.

There went his peace and quiet.

Dazai eyed the door with distaste. There wasn't a lock on it, and he didn't know any spells to keep it shut. Even if he did, it wouldn't be wise to try it unless he wanted to be rushed off to Madam Pomfrey the second the train reached Hogwarts. He purposefully turned back to his book.

“MS, the innate ability to perceive and interpret latent magic, is a staple to be considered a wizard and, much like a fingerprint, cannot be altered throughout the lifespan” the book went on to read. “Without the ability to perceive magic, it cannot be manipulated (Abbott, 1920; Grimm, 1943; Jackson & Kama, 1980). Despite this, the practice of interpreting latent magic is largely theoretical and has no current reliable experimental basis. Notably, even the most incapable of muggles can sense some potency of magic (Bates & Calder, 1895). By using a Sensing Stone—”

“What about this one?”

Dazai slammed his book shut, readying a glare at whoever had interrupted his reading a second time. Before he could, however, recognition stopped him short.

“Ron?”

Ron stared, eyes wide.

He was wearing a long, baggy sweater emblazoned with a stitched on “R.” Dazai recognized it as the one Mrs. Weasley had gifted her son last holiday season. Ron blinked several times before suddenly shaking out of his stupor. Hurriedly, he stepped into the compartment and slid the door shut behind him.

Ron nearly dove into the seat across from Dazai. “You don’t think anyone saw me come in here, do you?”

Dazai glanced to the door. He raised a brow.

“What? You don’t want to be seen with me? I thought we were over those silly rules of yours.”

“Wha—It’s not like that!” Ron sputtered indignantly, but his eyes tellingly averted to the left. “It’s—I mean—you’re *infamous* now!” He flailed.

Dazai snorted. “It’s good to see you again, too.”

Red bloomed across Ron’s cheeks and his mouth snapped shut with an audible click. The tension in his shoulders melted. “S’good to have you back, Dazai,” he grumbled. “Things weren’t the same without you.”

“I bet Professor Snape missed having me around,” Dazai said with a laugh.

“Are you kidding?” Ron smirked. It was the first smile Dazai had seen out of him yet. “For the first time in a year, no one was melting his cauldrons. I think he must have cried a tear of joy!”

Dazai breathed out a soft laugh, imagining that. Though it was a little hard to envision the ever-serious Snape with a teary expression. Speaking of Snape, that was one professor Dazai wasn’t looking to reunite with. By the end of his first year, the potion’s master had taken it upon himself to dig his nose into places it didn't belong. Hopefully, their few months apart had deterred any further desire to pry.

“Did I miss anything else while I was gone?”

“Well—”

“Ron! You shut the door on my face!” A squeaky voice interrupted.

A younger, long-haired version of Ron Weasley had her arms crossed and cheeks puffed out at the doorway. She had thrown it open at some point in an affronted haste. Ginger hair swept all the way down to her hips. Her sweater had a “G” drawn across it.

Dazai remembered having seen the girl briefly at Flourish and Blotts.

“Ginny!” Ron jumped. “You startled me. Get in here before someone sees!”

With a petulant huff, Ginny slammed the door shut behind her. She crossed her arms instead of taking a seat.

Dazai looked between Ron and Ginny. Recognition lit his eyes. “Your younger sister, Ron?” He smiled at the girl, laying on the charm thick. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, miss.”

Like flipping a switch, all the irritation in Ginny’s expression bled away as she turned to face Dazai.

He could tell the exact moment she realized who she was looking at. Dazai prepared himself for a fight. Or screaming.

Or both.

Ginny’s eyes widened and her mouth fell open. Unexpectedly, however, she didn’t scream or run away like the other students had. Instead, she steeled her shoulders. “D-Dazai, right? I’ve heard a lot about you from Ron and the twins.”

Oh.

Of course the littlest Weasley wouldn’t be afraid of him! Her brothers were his most enthusiastic friends, and had been since day one. If anyone was going to believe he wasn’t a *demon*, it would be a Weasley.

Dazai gave a soft smile. It seemed to further put Ginny at ease as she finally uncrossed her arms and settled in beside Ron. “Only good things, I hope.”

Ginny giggled. “Only *mischievous* things,” she corrected. Beside her, Ron rolled his eyes.

"Ginny is too good," Dazai took her hands gently in his. A proposition. "I would be greatly honored to commit a double suicide with you!"

A beat passed. Then,

"What?!"

Ron kicked Dazai in the shin. He dropped Ginny's hands without fanfare.

"Speaking of the twins," Ron butted in, "Fred and George were pretty adamant about finding you, Dazai. It was their idea to search the train for your compartment. I just happen to find you first."

"We just happen to find you first," Ginny argued. Ron didn't seem to be listening.

Dazai crossed his ankles under the seat. Unless something drastic had happened, Dazai couldn't think of any reason the twins would urgently be seeking him out. Which left only one possible explanation. Dazai nearly rolled his eyes, but held back. Fred and George were on another one of their self-assigned "older brother" jobs again, it seemed.

Instead of letting his (admittedly fond) exasperation show, Dazai changed the subject, "I don't see Angel with you."

Both Ron and Ginny blinked at the non-sequiter. Ron, evidently used to Dazai's antics by now, recovered quickest with a shake of his head. "He's sleeping in my luggage."

Dazai blinked. "You zipped Angel up in your suitcase? And you're always lecturing *me* about pet care."

Flushing, Ron puffed out his cheeks. "I know more than you about it. Besides, rats don't require as much care as an owl does."

"Angel is just a sick, little guy," Ginny told him. Dazai tried to recall if he had ever seen the rat ill, but decided he hadn't seen Angel consistently enough to actually be able to tell. Still, Angel was always too creepy-looking to ever seem the picture of health. "He needs his rest."

"Well, Featherbrain is as healthy as an owl can get," Dazai said, tilting his head to the charcoal-colored bird. She looked up from preening her feathers. "If you want to fuss over a *real* pet, you can start with her."

A beam split across Ginny's face. Taking the offer for what it was, she leaned forward to pet Featherbrain through the bars of her cage. Featherbrain ate up the attention.

"'Her?'" Ron asked. "You've finally stopped calling your owl an 'it.'"

Dazai shrugged. In all honestly, he wasn't sure what the reason was for the shift. He had spent the entirety of the last year thinking of Featherbrain as nothing more than an obnoxious pest. Or, on his worst days, an extension of Mori's long arm.

But then summer break came. Dazai's days were spent in Father's room, in Mori's office, or wasting away in the pits of the Port Mafia's kennels. Everything there was empty and cold. It was nothing like the warm, if difficult to navigate, walls of Hogwarts. Nothing like the raucous mess of the owlery. Life in Yokohama felt empty, and compared to life in Hogwarts Dazai was alone.

Except for Featherbrain.

Dazai shook the memories off, feeling they were too bleak to discuss with Ron and Ginny. Moreover, he didn't really understand the sentiment himself. Ron gave him an odd look when Dazai failed to explain.

Luckily, Dazai was saved from having to reroute the conversation when the train kicked to life beneath them. A sudden surge of motion had the trio shifting in their seats. Unable to see out the window, Dazai could only guess at how quickly they picked up speed. Before long, the *chug-a-chug* of train tracks filled the compartment.

"Ahh, we're off," Dazai noted, leaning back. He folded his hands across his lap.

Ron's eyes immediately fell onto the black gloves Dazai wore. He blinked at them, then very pointedly did not comment.

Ginny spoke up in his place. *"Ooh!* I'm so excited! A little nervous, but mostly excited." At some point, she had pulled away from Featherbrain to brace against the seat. Now that the train was worked up into a steadier rhythm, however, Ginny was eyeing the owl once again. "Do you think I'll be Gryffindor?"

"Weasleys are *always* Gryffindor," Ron informed her unhelpfully. She shot him a glare telling as much.

"What's so interesting about Gryffindor?" Dazai asked with a glint in his eyes. As expected, Ron was already scowling in his direction. The boy was too easy to rile up. "Slytherin is perfectly nice, too."

"You don't know anything about house loyalty, Dazai. Just because you waltz around the Slytherin *and* Gryffindor rooms like you own the place doesn't mean house distinctions aren't important!"

Dazai stuck out his tongue.

Across from him, Ron's face was the picture of exasperation. Ginny, however, had her eyes turned away as she shifted in her seat. *Oh,* Dazai thought, *she really is nervous.*

Worry about house loyalty wasn't something Dazai had ever partaken in. His only worry with the sorting ceremony had been about No Longer Human potentially nullifying the sorting hat's powers. Ginny's concerns were a bit simple compared to his own, but Dazai felt that he owed her a few kind words. The fact that Ginny hadn't screamed upon seeing him had come as a great relief.

"I'm sure everything will be fine," Dazai told her. She jumped, head snapping in the mafioso's direction. "If you want Gryffindor, then you'll get it. If not, I'm sure I could talk some sense into that ugly sorting hat for you, Ginny."

Just a wiggle of his bare fingers in front of the sorting hat, and it would be begging for its magical life, after all.

"Otherwise, the option for a painless double suicide is always on the table for us!" He cheered, this time quickly dodging another kick from Ron.

Ginny blinked a few times before suddenly having to raise a hand to smother her laughs. “Thanks, Dazai. That was nice of you to say.” She paused. "Well. Most of it was. That last bit about s-suicide..."

Ron looked between them, bewildered.

At that exact moment, the door swung open once again.

“Hellooo?”

“Is there a wee snakey in here? Or our kid siblings perhaps?”

Three pairs of eyes turned to the entrance. Fred and George stared back.

“Oh, hello you two,” Dazai greeted.

“You finally found us,” Ron intoned. “Took you long enough.”

Springing into action, Fred and George shut the door behind them and stepped forward in perfect sync with one another. Just like Ginny had, however, they didn’t initially take a seat.

“There you all are!”

“Snakey, you got those bandages off! Good!”

Fred leaned forward to examine Dazai’s face. He seemed satisfied with his impromptu inspection, but still didn’t make to sit. Looking around, Dazai realized why.

Dazai wrapped his hands around Featherbrain’s cage, picking her up and setting her down by his feet. With the owl moved, there was now one seat remaining in the compartment.

One seat—and two twins.

“My favorite twin can have a seat beside me,” Dazai told them. A sharp grin poked at the edges of his face. “My second favorite can sit on the floor. I’ll let you two decide for yourselves which is which.”

Fred and George shared a look. Then, without any words between them, they promptly squeezed into the same seat. Dazai scooted to the side as far as he could. Pressed up into the window, Dazai swatted Fred’s elbow out of his face.

“You love us both!” Fred and George said together.

Dazai rolled his eyes. Across from them, both Ginny and Ron were smothering their laughter.

“Whatever,” Dazai let out a not unfond breath. “Stop poking into me.”

The twins moved around as if to readjust, but the seat was just too small for three. Dazai grunted when George stepped on his toe.

“Sorry, Snakey. This is the best we can do!”

“Then sit on the floor,” Dazai deadpanned. “Both of you. I’d rather share with Featherbrain.”

Fred and George laughed, but didn’t move. Despite himself, Dazai didn’t protest any further. Though he *was* feeling cramped, Dazai noted that the twins had, in fact, made an effort to give him space. Fred was practically sitting on George’s lap.

Once they seemed mostly settled, Fred turned to Dazai. There was an excited glint in his eyes. “We really missed having you around, you know. Ron here is no fun when it comes to pranks!”

“He didn’t even help us with out test answer-key stealing scheme last year!” George bemoaned. “Or with our plan to swap the labels on the potions supplies.”

“Or when we charmed the infirmary pillows to explode and accidentally blew a hole in the wall!”

“Or when—”

“You two have been busy,” Dazai cut them off before they could really get going.

Fred and George nodded, faux-serious. “Well, it wasn’t all successful. Some of those were really more than two-person jobs.”

"Especially that pillow-bomb!"

The twins shivered. "Madam Pomfrey *really* had it out for us after that one!"

Dazai frowned. No one else in the gang had stepped up to help them?

“I’m not doing something with you that will get me expelled. Specially not Madam Pomfrey! She's a beast when she's angry!” Ron said. Beside him, Ginny rapidly nodded. Although she hadn’t been a part of their group the previous year, she must have been very familiar with Fred and George’s chaotic schemes.

“Fill me in later on the details,” Dazai told them. “Maybe we can give those plans another shot.”

The twins *whooped.*

Ron looked utterly exasperated, but didn’t bother to butt in. He knew a lost cause when he saw one, it seemed.

Dazai considered asking the twins for prank ideas against Lockhart, but decided against it as soon as the thought crossed his mind. While he wanted little more than to torment the professor, it was probably best to lay low. What he had done at Flourish and Blotts was

already brazen enough. Beyond that, Lockhart hadn't made any tangible threat to him yet. Until Dazai got a better feeling for the man, he didn't want to retaliate. Especially not with this Demon Student title hanging overhead. The last thing Dazai needed now was people thinking he would kill Lockhart, too.

...not that he hadn't thought about it.

The frustrated contemplation must have been visible on his face.

"You're thinking too hard about something, Snakey," George said, leaning all the way forward to peer around his brother.

"Yeah, lighten up!" Fred kicked a foot out excitedly, accidentally smacking Featherbrain's cage in the process. A peeved-sounding hoot answered in return. "Sorry, Featherbrain!"

Dazai shook his head. He had a lot of things to worry about—the Daily Prophet's slander, Lockhart's declaration, the Malfoys...

His laundry list of problems seemed to be never-ending.

But there was nothing Dazai could do about any of it right now. For the time being, all he had to focus on was getting to Hogwarts. After that, he would have the time and ability to slowly chip away at his problems.

Until then...

"You two play Quidditch, don't you? Tell me the rules."

Blaise *did* say they would go to a game together when they got the chance. It wouldn't hurt to learn a bit before then.

-

When the train finally came to a stop a few hours later, Dazai knew all there was to know about Quidditch. The game sounded rough, messy, and a little bit too based on luck for his tastes. Why did any of the players even bother showing up if everything just came down to if their Seeker caught the Golden Snitch? When Dazai voiced this thought aloud, each of the Weasley's gave him outrageously scandalized looks.

"Are you serious?!" Ron squawked. "I can't believe I'm friends with you."

"Don't give me that look." Dazai raised a brow. Then, noting how eagerly Ron defended the sport, he asked, "Have you thought about joining the Gryffindor Quidditch team, Ron?"

Ron froze up, not having expected the question. He laughed nervously. "Guess I've given it some thought..."

“You should try out!” Fred and George exclaimed. They eagerly leaned forward. “Between *three* Weasley’s, the other teams wouldn’t have a chance!”

Blood rushed to Ron’s face at their enthusiastic support. He coughed into his fist. “Well, maybe...”

Fred and George chuckled, clearly taking great joy in their little brother’s flustered expression. Ginny let out an exasperated breath.

Dazai didn’t understand what all the fuss was about. Maybe Quidditch was sort of like Hogwarts' houses: something people really, *really* cared about despite how idiotic it was.

By the time the twins had finally smothered their laughter, the train had come to a full stop. Peeking out the curtains, Dazai recognized their destination as the train station. He also caught sight of a familiar figure: tall, wide, and scraggly-haired, Hagrid stood just past one of the train’s doors. A second later, when students began exiting, Hagrid called, “First years! O’er here!”

“We made it,” Fred let out a long, weary sigh as he slumped over into George. “Finally.”

As though the words lit a fire underneath the compartment, the Weasleys and Dazai went into motion. Fred and George detangled from one another in a flurry of elbows and knees. With one particularly brash jerk, one of those elbows smacked directly into Dazai’s chest. Dazai was sure he would bruise.

“Sorry!”

“Yeah, sorry, Snakey!”

Across from them, Ron and Ginny snorted. They made no effort to help. Instead, they patted down their robes as they stood. A fresh pair of school robes hugged both of their shoulders. Ron’s was topped with a Gryffindor red tie, while Ginny’s had no such ornamentation.

Dazai brought a hand to his neck to carefully fix the green-and-silver bow there. Unlike everyone else in the room, his colors were indicative of Slytherin.

About half-way through the train ride, the group had split off to get changed into their robes. While the others had slunk of to the bathrooms, Dazai had stayed in the compartment to dress. He hadn’t been willing to brave the potentially crowded hallways. The others had been accommodating. Fred and George had even helpfully offered to keep watch of the room while Dazai dressed.

Now, a similar concern was rising up in Dazai.

The twins seemed to read his expression. “You want us to stand around you?”

“Shield you from everyone looking?”

Dazai shook his head. Although it sounded nice to postpone the inevitable conflict... “I’ll have to confront it at some point. Better not to push things off.”

Anyway, a mafioso didn't cower. Even when they thought it might be easier.

The twins didn't look entirely convinced, but also didn't press any further. Dazai nodded to them.

Then, without further ado, he opened the compartment door. Their belongings would stay behind to be magically gathered up later. With nothing more holding him back, Dazai took a deep breath and stepped out into the corridor.

There were only about five people left in their train carriage. The second Dazai stepped out, their eyes all snapped straight to him. He recognized the two girls from earlier do a double-take.

Dazai pulled his shoulders back and lifted his chin. Confidently, her turned away from the eyes on him and walked straight to the exit. The tell-tale *click* of shoes on tile told him that the Weasleys were following.

As they walked, people stared, mouths agape.

If Dazai thought the attention would lighten up upon exiting the train, he would be sorely mistaken.

For only a second, he faded into the bustle of Hogwarts students. Just another body amongst the masses. A nobody.

Then, another student who had fallen into step beside Dazai looked over, met his eyes, and squeaked. They opened and closed their mouth rapidly, but no words came out aside from a stuttering, *"y-y-you—!"*

Dazai very nearly slammed his hand over their mouth to shut them up.

Before he could, however, Fred and George manifested at his sides. They each slung an arm over his shoulder. Grinning sharply, they stared down the other student.

"Back off, kid," Fred said, simply.

"We're escorting our friend here to the carriages. He doesn't want any trouble."

The student—a third-year, perhaps—nodded frantically, evidently fearing some awful retribution for even looking their way. They proceeded to scamper off, stumbling over every other step as they ran. By now, quite a few curious eyes had been drawn to Dazai's little group. Whispers surrounded them.

The twins remained steadfast, however. Wrapped around Dazai, they paid the watchers no mind as they pushed through the crowd.

Whispers of The Demon Student followed them, terrified.

Dazai let himself be moved along, ducking his head somewhat. It wasn't that he couldn't handle the crowd on his own—he had certainly done harder things in the past. But it was

difficult to navigate confrontations at Hogwarts. While in the Port Mafia, Dazai could threaten bodily harm (or even enact it), here he was relegated to letting himself get backed into a corner. *And* he had to mind Mori's instructions on top of that. Making too much trouble would jeopardize the mission... wouldn't it? Or maybe not. Dazai needed to play his cards carefully.

Regardless. Dazai wouldn't say it aloud, but it was always a nice feeling to have the twins rushing to his side.

After a second more of walking, he asked, "Carriages?"

They'd moved mostly out of the train's crowd by now. It helped that, upon recognizing the twins' charge, people gave them a wide berth.

"Second-years and up ride to Hogwarts in carriages," Fred explained.

"They're pulled along by some invisible force!"

Dazai raised a brow. "An animation charm?" He asked, recalling the spell the twins used last year to make Ron's books fly.

Someone cleared their throat.

"They're called *thestrals*."

Dazai blinked, turning his head to follow the voice. Over him, Fred and George did the same.

A young, bushy-haired girl smiled his way.

"Hermione," Dazai's face split open into a smile, "fancy seeing you here."

She beamed, expression soft despite the odd looks they were getting. "I'm glad to see you all again," Hermione said. She looked from Dazai, to the twins, then to Ron, who had trailed behind somewhat. When her eyes landed on Ginny, she frowned. *"Oh!* I don't think we've ever met before. I'm Hermione Granger."

"Ginny Weasley," she greeted with a small wave.

"First year?" Hermione guessed, as though Ginny's small frame and wide eyes didn't make it obvious. "You'll be taking the boats, then. Just over there." She pointed.

Ginny followed her finger to where Hagrid was widely gesturing to something. Students had gathered around him like wanderers at sea to a lighthouse. Hagrid was certainly tall enough to act as one, Dazai thought amusedly.

Instead of rushing off straight away, though, Ginny nervously shifted on her feet.

"Go on!" the twins said, giving their little sister a light shove. "If you're late, the boats'll leave without you, and you'll have to spend all year living with the wild beasties in the Forbidden Forest!"

Ginny blanched.

Hermione tutted. “That isn’t true, you two. Anyway, she would just ride in with us if something like that did happen.”

Ron nodded, though he didn’t look particularly interested one way or another.

Upon seeing the genuinely worried look on Ginny’s face, Fred and George seemed to sober up a little. “Sorry, Ginny,” they apologized.

“There’s no need to be so nervous, little sis!”

“Yeah, we’ll save you a seat at the Gryffindor table once you're finished being sorted.”

“Off you go!”

Ginny blinked repeatedly before nodding. She looked a bit dazed. She said a hasty farewell before practically running off to find Hagrid amongst the crowds. It looked to Dazai as if the boats were already being boarded. If Ginny had hesitated any longer, she might actually have been left behind.

Dazai took a step forward, eager to get the group moving again. After a second, the twins, Ron, and Hermione followed.

“What’s a thestral?” He asked. “If it's not a spell.”

Hermione shook her head, curls bouncing. “It’s a type of magical creature. With all your research last year, I’m surprised you’ve never heard of them.”

Dazai shrugged. Outside of mountain trolls and dragons, magical creatures hadn’t exactly been a priority. “An invisible creature, *huh?*” Good thing he had his gloves on. Dazai couldn’t risk an accidental nullification with this many eyes on him.

“Some kind of horse,” the twins told him.

“An invisible horse,” Hermione clarified. “Actually, they’re quite interesting. Supposedly—”

Before she could finish speaking, the carriages in question came into view. The sight seemed to steal her breath away. Dazai himself froze in place as he looked over the carriage. Confusion pressed between his brows. The carriages themselves were rather lackluster. Dazai would hesitate to call them carriages, really. Rather, they were functionally large, black boxes attached to wheels. Some of them were already packed full of students, looking to be able to carry maybe five to each carriage.

But what really captured Dazai’s attention was the big, black horses standing in front of them. They were massive—taller than the average horse. They looked sickly thin, no thicker than their bones. Their skin looked no more than linen stretched taught. Ghastly. Huge, black wings stretched out from their backs. Their eyes were pitch black pools.

“I thought you said they were invisible,” Dazai said, brow pinched. The horses towered over the carriages. Clearly visible. There was no question about that.

When no one responded for a second, Dazai looked back to face the others. He was expecting, perhaps, the twins to be sharing a laugh. Or Hermione ready with a lecture on her tongue. What he saw, however, was the gang watching him with wide, aghast eyes.

Fred and George shared one of their looks.

Ron looked to the thestrals, then back to Dazai. He raised a brow. “They are. What do you mean, they’re not?”

“You can see them?” Hermione asked. Then, with horror dawning over her, she looked pointedly to the ground. Guilt flickered over her expression. “Right. Of course you can...”

Dazai frowned. Based on their reactions, Dazai was now sorely wishing he’d just kept his mouth shut. He turned to Hermione, silently asking her to explain. Ron seemed to be doing the same.

Hermione wrung her hands together. “Thestrals can only be seen by...” she shot him an apologetic glance, “...by people who have witnessed death and understood it.”

Ron’s mouth snapped shut with an audible *click*. Dazai frowned, the reality of those words sinking in.

Oh.

Dazai had seen death many times. People died in the Port Mafia every day. Jobs went wrong, interrogations reached their natural conclusion. Dazai had led some of those interrogations himself in the past under Father’s watchful gaze. How to hold the knife just right, how to make your words into a knife sharper still... Death in the Port Mafia, more often lately, was a pointless thing. Father ordered the death of his subordinates seemingly at random and waged war on unimportant gangs. As the man’s mind slipped away, so too did his morality.

So, yes. Dazai had seen death. Had held it in his blood-red hands and cradled it close.

But that wasn’t what Hermione was referring to now. It wasn’t the reason the twins and Ron were watching him like he was about to break apart. Nor was it the reason other students kept shooting him subvert glances.

Quirrell.

The only person Dazai had ever killed out of nothing more than pure rage.

Dazai shrugged off their stares. “I guess that makes sense.” Hoping to clear the air, he asked Hermione, “how does that work? Biologically, I mean.”

Hermione blinked, startled. “W-well, no one really knows.” She looked deeply relieved that Dazai hadn’t reacted negatively after learning about the thestrals’ true nature. “Thestrals are

often viewed as bad omens, so most researchers aren't willing to get close to them. And that's ignoring the fact that many researchers can't even *see* them!"

Dazai hummed in interest, eyeing the skeletal horses as the group began to walk again. Hermione took the lead, guiding them towards an empty carriage, while the twins continued to send Dazai subvert, worried glances every few seconds.

The thestral leading this carriage was just as large and menacing as the others. Still, Dazai was careful to keep his hands to himself as he boarded. The thestral kicked the ground nervously, but otherwise didn't attempt to run away from him.

The carriage was just large enough to fit everyone in their group and no one more. Ron and Hermione *oohed* as the carriage started to move underneath them. Dazai supposed he might have shared in their enthusiasm had he not been able to see the mechanisms at work. Meanwhile, Fred and George merely watched with amusement.

The thestral started off slowly, but quickly picked up pace. Soon enough, it was galloping at full speed over the Hogwarts bridge. Dazai braced himself against the seat to the muffled laughter of the twins.

"We're going pretty fast," Dazai told the others. "I might snap my neck if I jumped out right now."

If Fred and George grabbed his arms tightly after that remark, no one said anything.

Dazai peered out the side, where the first-year boats were slowly swimming to the castle. He was glad to have a private carriage this year, rather than a rocking boat surrounded by strangers. Dazai leaned back into his seat. All around them, thestrals were pulling students along towards the main gate.

With how fast the thestrals could run, it was only a matter of minutes before they arrived.

Dazai, Hermione, Ron, Fred, and George all hopped out of the carriage.

The thestrals needed no guidance. Within seconds of being unburdened, they spread their wings and flew off towards the Forbidden Forest. Dazai watched them disappear into the night with a contemplative frown.

"Thinking hard?" Fred teased.

Dazai turned back to his friends, then shook his head. "Just looking." He tilted his chin towards where the thestrals had disappeared to.

Fred followed his gaze, unseeing. After a second, he seemed to realize what Dazai was indicating. His mouth dropped into an understanding "O."

As they walked through the gate to Hogwarts, Dazai was almost able to forget that he was Public Enemy #1 in magical society. There was an excited air buzzing around the school. Friends reunited, people happily chattered, and magic danced around them. Dazai and his own gang were doing much the same, laughing amongst themselves.

He drew in a long breath of air, and the familiarly overwhelming buzz of magic turned in his lungs. It crackled and popped against No Longer Human. Dazai took a few more deep breaths before the sensation quieted to a more manageable dull hum.

Here we are, Dazai thought, *second year.*

Dazai waved goodbye to his Gryffindor friends as soon as they entered the Great Hall. He walked to the Slytherin table, eyes peeled for a sign of Draco or Blaise.

The illusion of peace hanging over him shattered immediately.

“You *did* come back,” a Slytherin growled upon seeing him. *“Demon.”*

Well. There went his good day.

Automatically, Dazai drew on a more suitable persona.

"I know... Unfortunately, I didn't die over summer break," he said, raising a single brow. He went to take a seat. "Not for a lack of trying, though."

But before he could sit, someone put their arm over the seat, barring him from sitting. It took a second for Dazai to recognize Crabbe... *or was that Goyle?*

“Taken," the Slytherin grunted at him.

“I don’t want to sit you with, meathead.”

Although he would like to sit *somewhere*. Dazai looked up to the next empty spot, only for the blonde-headed girl there to block her seat as well. Beside her, a ginger-haired boy did just the same.

Dazai stopped in his tracks as every single Slytherin made an effort to indicate, *no you can’t sit here, Dazai.* Some of the students turned away as they did so, looking nervously at the floor. However, more than half of the Slytherins openly glared at him.

So this was how his year was going to be. *Joy of joys.* And to think he'd *asked* about returning to Hogwarts...

Dazai was unsurprised to see that Pansy was among the students staring.

“Look who it is... The mudblood *and* murderer,” Pansy sneered when his eyes lingered on her for too long, “You aren’t welcome at our table, Demon.”

“Pansy. I’d say it’s lovely to see you again, but that would be lying,” Dazai said, expression blank. Then, with a raised brow, he added, “You of all people should know that the situation was Quirrell was more complicated than the Daily Prophet lets on.”

She scowled, clearly uninterested in Dazai’s rebuttal. Her lip curled, another insult poised on her tongue, but before she could loose it, her expression suddenly warmed.

“Draco!” Pansy chimed. She sat up straighter and patted the empty spot beside her. “Sit here. I saved this seat just for you.”

Dazai glanced over his shoulder.

Just then, Draco walked out of a throng of other students. His back was ramrod straight, looking just as tense as he had when he’d been with his father the other day.

“Hello, Draco,” Dazai greeted.

He waited for a response.

Waited...

Except Draco didn’t even stop to glance in his direction.

Instead, he walked, chin-up, straight past Dazai. He settled in beside Pansy without ever saying a word.

Ah.

Pansy gave Dazai a shit-eating grin.

Dazai couldn’t help the frown overtaking his face. Draco was acting as if he didn’t even exist, when just the other day they had chatted like old friends. Dazai’s eyes narrowed as he tried to make sense of Draco’s one-eighty. Meanwhile, Draco had tilted his head to the side so that his attention was fully on Pansy.

Dazai’s frown deepened into a full-on scowl.

Okay. So he was completely alone this year. S*hould I just go sit at the Gryffindor table?* he thought, fighting off an unwelcome wave of hurt. *Or use my Demon Student title to threaten someone out of their seat?* Only, he didn’t need any more trouble. Attacking students might get him expelled.

Course settle, Dazai turned on his heel. He tried to find one of his Gryffindor friends’ eyes over the tables. Before he could, however—

“You can sit with me, friend.”

Dazai froze in place. The words prickled his ears, familiar and warm. His eyes immediately shot to the voice’s source. It was easy to find—every other Slytherin present also immediately locked-on to the betrayer of their cause.

Blaise!

Blaise sat at the very end of the table, one hand pressed into his cheek and the other open in a small wave. His hair had been cut short and he had gone through a somewhat noticeable growth spurt, but he was still Blaise. Dazai felt the ice rapidly cooling his gut melt.

He invited himself into the spot on Blaise's left, ignoring how the other students shuffled away from them. With everyone giving them a wide berth, it almost felt like Blaise and Dazai had their own private dining area.

"It's been awhile," Dazai greeted, cheeky.

Blaise's lips twitched upwards. "So it has." His expression softened. "I'd ask how you've been, but..."

Dazai followed his gaze to the multitude of glaring eyes faced their way. "I'm not the most popular these days."

"Were you ever?"

Dazai snorted. "You're killing your reputation by sitting with me."

Blaise gave him a pointed look. "I don't have a reputation. Besides, Pansy still likes me."

"Does she?" Dazai lifted his head. Pansy was still sitting with Draco, chatting angrily about something to a few other upperclassmen. Her eyes flashed to Dazai, as if having sensed his attention. When Dazai wiggled his fingers in greeting, she mimed throwing up.

"It's hard to tell from your vantage point, but she can be quite friendly." Blaise paused. "On occasion."

Dazai thought that over, but couldn't recall ever witnessing Pansy act something even *near* friendly. He shook his head. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Blaise shrugged, nonplussed.

"And Draco..?"

Blaise glanced to Dazai, then to the individual in question. He made a noncommittal noise. "He said you would understand."

Dazai blinked in question.

"We rode in together on the train," he said by way of explanation. "He told me that you would know why he was—" he gestured vaguely to where Draco was making an effort to pretend Dazai didn't exist.

The words washed over Dazai. He frowned, parsing out their meaning.

Clearly, Draco had been vague on purpose. Moreover, he seemed confident that Dazai wouldn't take offense. Which meant...

"I guess that's just how it is," Dazai said with a huff. Blaise raised a curious brow, but received no answer in return.

It was obvious—Dazai should have figured it out right away. Lucius must have given Draco some instruction to stay out of Dazai's way. If not that, then Draco was clearly trying to protect his reputation. Hanging out with the Demon Student could only bring negative attention, after all. To the Malfoy family, associating with the Demon Student was akin to social suicide.

Draco was protecting himself.

He was protecting Lucius.

Dazai leaned into his palm, a tired sigh escaping his lips. He cast a wayward gaze to where Draco was sitting.

"Blaise, do you still have my knife?"

When Blaise hummed, Dazai shifted his focus back to the other boy. Blaise patted his chest, where Dazai knew there to be an inside pocket. "Always," he said, matter-of-fact. "You aren't planning to stab anyone, are you?"

A smile split Dazai's face. He shook his head. "No, no. Just wondering if you'd kept it."

Blaise rolled his eyes, fond. "Of course I did, Boss."

Dazai smiled and rubbed a thumb over his chest. Blaise clocked the movement and gave a warm smile of his own.

Before the conversation could go any further, the Great Hall suddenly went near silent. Dumbledore stood at the front of the room, arms out to quiet down anyone still chattering. Beside him, Dazai saw Professor McGonagall placing the sorting hat onto its stool. Near the wall, a line of first-year students were gathered, nervously awaiting their sorting. Dazai turned back to Dumbledore.

"Welcome! To another year at Hogwarts," Dumbeldore announced with a booming voice. A few cheers rose up at his announcement. Notably, however, the Slytherin table was dead silent. Tense, or maybe scornful. "Before we begin, let me first introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor: Gilderoy Lockhart!"

Again, the student body broke out into cheers and applause. Dazai stayed silent, eyes searching out Lockhart among the other professors. It wasn't hard to pick out the man's garish robes when he was looking. Lockhart stood and waved to his fans. Dazai noted, with no small amount of amusement, that Snape seemed to be glaring holes into the author's robe.

Dumbledore continued to impart his wisdom onto the students, but it was nothing particularly interesting. Dazai largely tuned him out. He kept an ear open for any discussion of himself or Quirrell, but heard nothing. It seemed Dumbeldore was still trying to keep that whole situation on the down-low, despite everything. Frustration prickled at Dazai's chest.

Not long after, McGonagall stepped forward. She held the sorting hat aloft and began calling students forward. Among the new first-years, Dazai only recognized one name.

“Weasley, Ginny!”

Ginny jumped when she was called.

Then, taking in a deep breath, she strode across the stage towards the sorting hat. McGonagall set it down on her head. It fell down well over her eyes. The audience watched in silence for a short moment before the hat cried out, “Gryffindor!”

Immediately, applause broke out at the lion’s table.

Dazai caught sight of Fred and George, who had jumped to their feet with whooping calls. Ron, sitting beside them, had his head ducked low at the twins’ antics. Still, Dazai noticed he was clapping loudly along with them. Ginny, a wide, toothy grin across her face, practically skipped to join them.

The rest of the sorting passed without fanfare. The only other student to briefly capture Dazai’s interest was a young boy carrying a heavy-looking muggle camera in both hands. Given his recent experiences with flash-photography, Dazai was only a little wary. But he was just as quickly drawn into his own private thoughts again, instead.

Dazai watched with lidded eyes, only coming out of his head when plates of food suddenly manifested in front of him. Blaise had already finished plating his food when Dazai finally reached out to serve himself.

Blaise’s eyes lingered pointedly on Dazai’s small serving.

Dazai stuck a crab leg in his mouth mulishly.

When the meal ended, Dazai trailed behind the mass of Slytherin’s as they walked down to the dungeon common rooms. Although he chattered with Blaise on the way, it lacked Dazai’s usual enthusiasm. He could no longer ignore the glares pointed his way. He couldn’t look past the way his peers looked at him with unmasked fear.

They were missing the bigger picture, Dazai knew. Blaise still walked amicably at his side, a monument to the greater plot between Dazai and Quirrell. But...

But.

Mori and the Port Mafia stood at Dazai’s back, a shadow that stretched for miles. It was a darkness that, even through it all, Dazai had yet to fully reveal to his Hogwarts friends. Only Draco knew of his involvement with the mafia. And now, Draco was keeping his distance. Refusing even to glance in Dazai’s direction.

And a mafioso shouldn’t care, but...

If Blaise knew the truth about the everything, would he look at Dazai with those glaring eyes, too? Would the twins?

Dazai felt the hateful and horrified eyes of his peers linger on him. Felt the animated portraits on the wall watch him from behind their watercolor prisons. The year had only just begun,

and enemies surrounded Dazai at every turn.

This place is really starting to feel like home, he thought with a grimace.

Chapter End Notes

holding blaise gently in my hands u_u

thanks for reading and commenting! hope everyone has a great week!
see ya next week! :)

next up: classes begin, and I continue to push my snape & dazai agenda

A Good Start

Chapter Summary

Snape fumes, Dazai adjusts, and Lockhart continues to be his usual deplorable self.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Severus Snape started every year with a precise lesson plan written out and a no-nonsense attitude. He did not make accommodations for struggling students and he did not fall behind in his lessons. Problem students quickly learned that he would neither be accepting late assignments nor would he be giving extra credit. If you didn't do the work, you failed. Simple as that.

Until this year, that was.

Because this year, Severus would be teaching an extra class all for just one student. One student, who Severus knew had never done his homework and rarely, if ever, participated in class. If it were any other student, Severus would have scoffed in their face and told them, "at this point, it would be more prudent for you to just drop out."

And yet...

There was just *something* about Dazai Osamu.

Severus couldn't put his finger on just what that *something* was. There were any number of things that made the boy stand out. For starters, Dazai was awfully blasé about failing all of his classes. He openly attempted to flunk out, seeming not to care for the stakes whatsoever. Outside of academics, the boy had pulled together the most unusual friend group Severus had ever seen in Hogwarts' history. But was that enough to twist Severus' morals into a knot?

There was more to Dazai. A *lot* more. Most of it, Severus was in the dark about. But that didn't mean he hadn't clocked *something* going on with that boy. The way he wrapped himself up in bandages, for one. Or how he dodged eating a full meal. Or tensed up under the eyes of an adult.

And then there was the *rest* of it.

The Quirrell situation. The Daily Prophet. Albus' blatant disregard for the boy's safety.

Dazai's disregard for his *own* safety.

And there was a burnt letter sitting in Severus' office desk. He'd read it at least a hundred times over, but gleaned nothing from it save for an overwhelming sense of unease. No leads on Dazai's home life, except for that Snape was fairly sure it wasn't a *good* one.

Moreover, Dazai Osamu could not do magic. Enrolled in a magical school, yet violently ill whenever he attempted to spell cast. He *could* cast, Severus knew. But at what cost?

Yes, Severus thought, Dazai Osamu was a student who seemed to fall short of normal at every turn. And thus, against his better judgement, Severus made accommodations. He wrote up a new lesson plan, set aside time to teach one-on-one, and looked closer than he ever had before.

And still, guilt boiled in his gut.

Severus took a long sip of his coffee, drowning out the bitter pit in his stomach with something even more bitter. Disgust spitting across his face, Severus leaned across the table to reach for the sugar cubes. He grabbed four. They fell into his mug with a splash.

"Is the coffee not to your liking, Severus?"

The potion's professor took a sip before glancing up. Sweetness warmed his tongue. "It is now," he grumbled.

Albus Dumbledore looked down at him, amused, before taking a seat. He floated a cup of tea into his hand. Although Severus normally enjoyed the more mellow tang of tea in the morning, he could already feel exhaustion nipping at his veins. Severus was blind as to how Albus could start the year off without something stronger to jumpstart him.

Around them, the Great Hall was silent. It would be several minutes still before the early risers stumbled out of their common rooms. The students weren't even awake yet, and Severus was ready to call it a day. He took another long draw of his coffee, willing it to give him energy.

"I have a good feeling about this year," Albus said suddenly.

Severus turned up a brow. "You can't be serious."

Albus hummed, evidently humored by Severus' weariness.

"A good year? You hired *Gilderoy Lockhart,"* Severus spat the name. "That man is a fraud. What qualifications does he have to be teaching our students? Aside from the repulsive charm of his fame."

Albus shot him a side-long glance. Then, as though he were imparting nothing more important than the weather, he commented, "No one else would accept the job." Severus' jaw snapped shut. Albus continued, "You know as well as I that Hogwarts is considered a less than safe place to work at the moment."

"Nonsense," Severus growled.

Minerva McGonagall entered the Great Hall with a sweeping flash of robe. She took one look at the glare on Severus' face and wisely chose to sit at the far end of the staff table.

"You read the paper. Gilderoy only accepted this job to harass a student," Severus levelled the headmaster with a harsh glare. It was true—there was no denying it. When the Daily Prophet article first landed on his desk, Severus had practically torn out his hair. Gilderoy had openly threatened Dazai. Moreover, the news had *gleefully* reported on it. As if bodily threats to a child were a *good* thing. "The man should be fired. His behavior towards my student is unacceptable."

Needless to say, he'd had to physically hold himself back from stomping across campus and giving Gilderoy a piece of his mind.

"The publicity *is* worrisome," Albus admitted. "But, as you so eloquently put it, Gilderoy is a fraud. I doubt he is capable of truly harming Mr. Dazai."

"He already has," Severus ground out. He bit his tongue to keep from shouting. Judging from the glance Minerva sent their way, he hadn't been entirely successful. "You saw how the students reacted to him yesterday. Gilderoy's flashy behavior is in no small part responsible."

Albus took a drink instead of responding outright. Severus did the same. The warm brew forced him to pause, drawing the anger from him in a wash of sugary coffee. Severus took a deep breath.

As he did, the overlarge doors to the Great Hall swung open. They creaked ajar slowly and pushed aside to reveal Hogwarts' first early riser of the year.

In keeping with his schedule the previous year, Dazai Osamu was an early bird. He yawned as he entered the Great Hall. Dazai looked haggard, as if he hadn't gotten more than a few minutes sleep last night. His hair was mussed up and uneven.

Evidently, the boy was so tired that he barely even registered the professors present. Only as an afterthought did he blink up in their direction. At Severus' side, Albus raised a hand in greeting. Dazai sluggishly bowed his head. When the boy took his seat, he did so gingerly. Severus noted he picked the seat at the very edge of the Slytherin table. It was an unobtrusive spot, out of the way.

Dazai sat there yesterday, as well. Severus had watched then as Dazai's peers antagonized and isolated him. It had something sharp biting at Severus' gut to have to watch. He had debated stepping in himself when another of his snakes, Blaise Zabini, offered Dazai a seat. Severus wouldn't admit it aloud, but he was glad at least one person was still on Dazai's side.

Tearing his eyes off of Dazai, who had summarily collapsed into the table and begun napping, Severus looked to Albus. He was careful to keep his voice low when he spoke. "At the very least, explain to the students what really happened last year with Quirrell."

Albus sipped his tea. His own twinkling eyes landed on Dazai's hunched over form. He sighed—this was a well-worn argument of theirs. "We do not know what truly transpired."

“You know the boy isn’t some sadistic monster, as the media is making him out to be. Tell the students. Tell the *Daily Prophet.* For Merlin’s sake, Albus.”

Albus tilted his head, still inspecting Dazai from his seat. The Slytherin boy in question had yet to even twitch.

“Where did Skeeter even get her information from?” Severus asked more forcefully, not letting up until Albus finally looked back at him. “I encountered her only once before the story broke. I was less than forthcoming with information.”

“Moreover, her stories appear to be little more than fiction,” Dumbledore agreed. “Another mystery to investigate, I suppose. Although, I do have my suspicions.” He hummed, sounding unconcerned. “Speaking of investigations. Severus?”

His eyes flashed once again to Dazai’s resting form. Curiously, Severus noted with a frown, breakfast had yet to manifest around the boy. The tables were charmed to provide food for students that arrived at certain times of the day. He would need to check the spellwork later. Make sure everything was still in working order.

But that was a problem for another time. Severus sneered as he turned his focus back to the headmaster. “I’ve looked into everything I could find about Dazai Osamu since last year ended.”

“Your report?”

“Nothing.”

Albus raised a brow. “Nothing?” He asked, turning back to his tea as though it were the more interesting thing happening.

“Dazai Osamu, son of Mori Ougai. Homeschooled from ages four to ten. Attended Hogwarts at age eleven. Lives in Yokohama, Japan.”

Albus paused, silently absorbing Severus’ listed information. With a wave of his hand, Albus levitated a knife. It floated freely for a second before spreading raspberry jam over a slice of toast. “And? What else have you uncovered?”

Severus scowled. “Muggle documents are tiresome to slog through. I could find no evidence of a family name *Dazai* anywhere. My best assumption is that he was adopted elsewhere and chose to keep the last name.” He paused. “His father graduated medical school and now works private practice.”

“Muggle documents may be tedious, but they are often extensive. Surely, you could find more information on Mr. Dazai. I’m surprised you gave up so easily. Was it not you, rather than I, who was concerned for him?”

Severus nodded, conceding the point. But— “Most of the time.”

Albus paused mid-swipe of the knife.

“Most of the time, muggle records are extensive,” Severus said. “When I attempted to gain access to Mori Ougai and Dazai Osamu’s records, I was turned away.”

“Turned away?” Albus asked, suddenly looking much more interested than he had been moments before.

“I went through the usual channels,” Severus said. The usual channels being their global magical connections. Hogwarts, and the other magical schools, had certain privileges. One of which being the ability to run background checks on all their students—magical and otherwise. But when Severus reached out to the Yokohama government... “higher clearance was requested.”

Albus had entirely paused, now. The knife slowly lowered back to the jar of jam, where it remained. He gestured for Severus to continue.

“Even after expressing concern for the boy’s well-being, I was turned away.” Severus had specifically used the word ‘abuse’ when forming his requests for information. Despite that, the respondents had seemed unimpressed with his urgency. “I inquired specifically after Mori Ougai, and was turned away almost immediately thereafter.”

Albus nodded, urging Severus to expand on his story.

Unfortunately, there was nothing more to share. Severus had sent letters by owl, had attempted to navigate a muggle cell phone, had even visited in person once. And every single time, without fail, he had been given a single response to the effect of:

Yokohama minds its own business, and so should you.

The nonchalant dismissal had reminded Severus strongly of Albus’ unwillingness to look past his big picture.

“Interesting,” Albus commented, a certain gleam in his eye.

Severus frowned. He didn’t like that look at all. “I’ll keep investigating, but the legal landscape in Yokohama is difficult to navigate.”

And *confusing* to navigate. Never before had Severus had so much trouble digging up student info. Was it because Dazai lived in Japan and not Europe, as was customary for Hogwarts students? That tidbit, in and of itself, was just another mystery surrounding the bandaged boy. Severus took a slow sip from his coffee.

“Do that, please,” Albus said. “I’ll admit, you’ve got me a bit curious now. Although I doubt the boy and his father are in any way significant, their government’s behavior is interesting. If there is a reason for their lack of collaboration, I would like to know. Good work, Severus.”

Severus sighed, feeling that his work had been anything but.

“As for your other topic of investigation..?”

“About Special Abili—”

“You’re talking about me, aren’t you?” A grating voice suddenly chipped in. “Is it difficult, being around someone famous? I’m afraid I can’t stoop to your level, Severus!”

Merlin’s Beard, no! It’s too early to deal with him!

A weary grumble slipped out of Severus’ throat before he could catch it. Even this early in the morning, Gilderoy’s hair was perfectly combed and his inanely colored robes were ironed to perfection. When he smiled, his teeth sparkled.

“Did you brush your teeth with *glitter?”* Severus spat. From across the table, he heard Minerva choke on a laugh.

Gilderoy faltered for only a second, before flashing his immaculate teeth into an even wider and more obnoxious smile. “And damage my beautiful teeth? No, no! My smile is naturally this charming.”

Full of unearned confidence and charm, Gilderoy sat down in the seat directly beside Albus. Severus, on Albus’ other side, glowered. “Can you not see,” the words were thick with distaste, “that we are in the middle of an important conversation?”

Gilderoy didn’t pay him any mind, choosing instead to take Albus’ half-jammed toast for himself. “Do enlighten me,” he said. Severus’ brow twitched. “As a fellow Hogwarts professor, I should be included, no?”

Albus smiled, pleasant. *“Ah,* I’m afraid this is a matter for Severus and I alone. Unless your travels have provided any insight into dealing with particularly tight-lipped governments.”

“I’ve been too busy being lauded by such governments as a hero.”

Severus didn’t believe a word that came out of that white and shiny mouth.

“I expected as much,” Albus said.

Below them, the Great Hall doors pushed open again. A throng of a dozen-or-so students sleepily ambled to their tables. Severus watched as they grouped together with their friends. Although it was still quite early, the students seemed to buzz with an invisible energy. First day hype. Severus didn’t share in it at all. Glancing to the Slytherin table, he supposed Dazai didn’t much care for it, either. The boy had yet to sit up from his impromptu nap.

It wouldn’t be long now before the other students finally roused. Thinking this, Severus withdrew the stack of schedules from his robe. He tapped them against the table to neaten them. Nearby, Minerva was doing the same.

“The trials and tribulations of youth,” Gilderoy said suddenly. Severus turned an eye on him, only to see the flashy professor was watching the students as well. “I hope my prestige doesn’t distract them from their studies.”

More students flooded into the hall. Severus idly watched them.

“Of course, I won’t be the only thing distracting students this year,” Gilderoy said sagely. Severus nearly laughed—*did this idiot have any idea what he was saying?*

A group of Slytherin students (Theodore Nott, Millicient Bullstrode, and Tracey Davis, Severus recognized) stilled upon realizing who was already sitting there. They shared a look before making a careful effort to walk around Dazai. They hastened their steps, only slowing down once they were well away from Dazai’s little corner of the Slytherin table. A few seconds later, another group of Slytherins did the exact same.

“See? That Demon Boy seems to be distracting them well enough, don’t you think? Perhaps we should simply expel him.”

Severus’ head whipped over to Gilderoy immediately. The Defense professor didn’t look sheepish in the slightest for suggesting such an asinine thing. “He is a student as much as any other.”

Gilderoy scoffed. “He’s a killer. Moreover, did you read about what happened at Flourish and Blotts? Of course you did, I was in it.” He nodded, emphatic. “He attacked me. *Me!”*

“If I recall correctly, you threatened him first,” Severus said.

“I merely suggested to my fans that a hero such as myself would be perfect to defeat Hogwarts’ demon.” He grinned. “Don’t you think so? Consider it a small favor. I get to write my next bestselling book, and Hogwarts is free from its current... plight.” He said *plight* like it was a souring meat on his tongue. Distaste rippled across his expression for only a second.

“You cannot attack students,” Severus ground out. *Seriously—did he actually need to explain that?!* “A professor attacking a student is *precisely* what led to last year's incident in the first place.”

Gilderoy paused. For a second, Severus thought the man might actually realize how absurd his proclamations were. “Don’t be daft, Severus. You’ve seen what the papers have to say about that boy.”

Pointedly, Severus shot Albus a glare. The force of his silent *I told you we need to address this* went entirely ignored. Fed up, Severus slammed his hands down on the table and rocketed to his feet. Gilderoy flinched. Beside him, Albus raised a brow in question.

Without a word, Severus grabbed his schedules from the table and summarily stormed towards the Slytherin tables.

Gilderoy made a snotty sound and commented, “Some people never change, right, Albus?”

Severus left before he could hear any further.

He was scowling—Severus knew that. But the expression on his face must have been especially horrifying, because Nott practically screamed when Severus slapped a class schedule down in front of the boy.

Nott's friends abruptly went dead silent. They accepted their schedules with a quivering, "thank you, Sir."

Severus handed out schedules to whichever students he passed, making his way down the table. With most of the students still somewhere between their bedroom and the Great Hall, it didn't take long for him to reach Dazai. As if sensing his presence, Dazai sluggishly lifted his head from his arms. When he yawned, his jaw cracked.

"Good morning, Professor," Severus' problem child greeted tiredly.

"Did you get any sleep last night?" Severus asked before he could stop himself. Closer now, he could see the deep, black bags underneath Dazai's eyes. "I won't accept sleeplessness as a reason for failing to participate in class, Mr. Dazai."

Dazai snorted, evidently finding amusement in something he'd said. Severus raised a brow.

"You look scary with an expression like that," Dazai explained, smile crooked. He leaned forward into a gloved palm. "But everything you've said to me so far just sounds concerned. Are you worried about me?"

You know I am, Severus bit back internally. Using their close proximity to give Dazai a once-over, he searched for any sign of injury or illness in the boy's form. Aside from a few scrapes and cuts, however, there was nothing. Even the few marks Severus did spot could be excused as evidence of a child's roughhousing, and were clearly healed over. He temporarily shelved that particular investigation.

Sneering, he dropped the boy's schedule in front of him. Dazai blinked in surprise before leaning forward to read the paper. Severus let him. Instead of moving on immediately to the next student, as Severus had been doing, he paused and waited for Dazai to read the schedule. It wasn't a minute before Dazai looked up, a question written on his face.

"What's this class on Saturday? *Remedial Magics,"* He read, pouting. "I thought the weekend was free time."

"Due to your condition, the staff and I are in agreement that you would benefit from a more one-on-one learning style," Severus explained. He took some pleasure in the way Dazai's face scrunched up at the thought of extra lessons. "Your first remedial class will be held in the infirmary. Do not be late."

Dazai's eyes lit up in obvious question, but Severus cut him off with a raised hand.

"There will be time for questions later. Eat your breakfast." At some point between Dazai's waking and Severus' walking to him, the table had filled over with foods. These spells definitely needed some tweaking. "And behave yourself, boy. I hope I do not need to remind you that tomfoolery will not be tolerated."

A tired grin split across Dazai's face. He, too, was clearly recalling all of the explosive potions he made the year previous. If there was only one thing Severus hoped Dazai would learn from the whole Quirrell fiasco, it would be to calm his meddlesome antics. Judging by

Dazai's quirked lips, however, that was hardly the case. "I'm always on my best behavior, Sir."

"That's horrifying to hear," Severus deadpanned.

Dazai shrugged. His hand hovered over the schedule, but his eyes remained locked on Severus. Then, abruptly, he turned away. Severus blinked in confusion at the sudden change.

"Good morning, Professor. Dazai," Blaise greeted with a yawn.

Oh. Dazai's friend was here. That explained why Dazai's shoulders had at once gone limp with ease. Severus hadn't even noticed how tense his student was before, but the difference now was stark.

Without ceremony, Blaise sat down directly at Dazai's side. He turned an eye in Severus' direction before reaching across the table to serve himself breakfast. A bright crimson batch of strawberries found their way onto his plate.

"Mr. Zabini, your schedule."

Blaise took the offered paper. "Thank you," he said, giving it a cursory once-over. Dazai peeked over his shoulder to skim the contents as well.

"It's no fair that Blaise doesn't have extra lessons, too," he whined before slumping dramatically back into the table. "I'm dying of jealousy." He paused, blinked, and whispered into Blaise's ear just loud enough for Severus to strain to hear, *"is that a valid method of suicide? Jelousy-induced death?"*

Blaise patted his friend on the back, solemn. Then, without a word, he began to prepare an extra plate of food. He slid a plain piece of toast and an apple in front of Dazai. "Eat. It will make you feel better."

"It won't cure my jealousy at all, Blaise!"

Despite his pouting words, Severus watched as Dazai tore off a strip of toast and bit down on it. Impressed with Blaise's mother-henning, Severus left them to it. He wasn't about to get involved with this.

More and more students were awake now. Maybe he could call it early—let the kids figure out their schedules for themselves instead of forcing him to hand them out one-by-one. Severus could already feel a headache coming on. Returning to his breakfast would probably help...

A quick glance to the staff table saw Gilderoy explaining something to the other professors with a sparkling flourish. Beside him, Minerva looked ready to throw her coffee in his face.

For the first time in his grouchy, tiresome tenure as a Hogwarts professor, Severus found himself preferring the company of students.

Dazai decided he preferred nights at the Leaky Cauldron.

There was a lock on his door, on over-sized quilt to wrap up in, and a kindly old man who brought him breakfast in bed. Dazai spent his nights reading until it got too dark. At which point, he would tuck himself up against the plush pillows and sleep until morning.

The bedrooms in Hogwarts were shared, the beds topped with a single blanket, and they were distressingly far from the Great Hall.

It wasn't terrible. Last year, Dazai had acclimated rather quickly to the sudden change in housing style. Returning to Hogwarts now felt a bit like shaking hands with an old friend, and he was already falling back into familiar routines: steal the Slytherin bathroom to brush his teeth and change, tightly wrap the curtains around his bed, and sleep until just before dawn. It was a routine that first-year Dazai had grown quite fond of.

And Dazai nearly enjoyed it again his second-year.

Nearly.

Every creak in the night had him shooting awake. Every cough from another bed, every excited whisper, *everything* had Dazai's brain screaming, *"you are surrounded by enemies! Stay on guard!"*

Some brat yawned in the night, and Dazai too quickly convinced himself it was a dog's panting breath.

Needless to say, Dazai did not get a full night's rest. He barely managed an hour, squeezed between the tossing and turning of his housemates in the night. It was with great displeasure that Dazai finally forced himself out of bed and trudged his way to the Great Hall.

Whereupon he had promptly folded his arms into a pillow and fallen back asleep right on the table.

"I'm sure if you tell the professors you aren't feeling well, they'll let you nap," Blaise told him.

Dazai yawned into his sleeve. He shook his head.

Blaise brought up a valid point, actually. With his new curriculum set in place, Dazai noticed that the professors were being extra careful with him in class.

During their first lesson, McGonagall had instructed the class to perform one transfiguration spell they learned in first-year. However, she asked Dazai to write a short paragraph merely *describing* one such spell. He did so only begrudgingly. An hour later in charms, the class was given a revisionary lesson on the levitation spell. Being a spell that Dazai was decently

familiar with, he had pulled his wand out to practice. Professor Flitwick had immediately gone deathly pale and told him, in a teetering voice, to simply read the text instead.

“I don’t want to be coddled,” Dazai said with a huff, then corrected hastily, “Well, I wouldn’t mind taking a nap, but it’s not any fun if I don’t have to bully the professors into it.”

Blaise shot him an exasperated look.

Dazai shrugged him off. “Either way, I doubt our next professor will give me a break.”

“Next is...” Blaise trailed off, plucking the schedule from his cloak as they walked. Upon seeing what was written there, he nodded in hasty agreement. “Defense Against the Dark Arts with Professor Lockhart.” He glanced to Dazai, whose face had scrunched up in displeasure. “I see.”

Dazai hummed, slumping somewhat. Blaise guided them up a spiral staircase. *“Ah,* Blaise read The Daily Prophet article, too?”

“Draco told me about it," he said. "Professor Lockhart really has it out for you."

“Maybe I just won’t show up to class...” Dazai grumbled, self-indulgent. He already knew that wouldn’t be the case. Between the students’ attention on him and the Malfoy’s ever-watching eye, Dazai had to be careful when showing weakness. And avoiding Lockhart would definitely show weakness.

Blaise shot him a glance, then wisely didn’t comment. Instead, they continued to walk side-by-side down one corridor then the next. The other students were keeping their distance, shooting glares Dazai’s way but not stepping in to start something. They thought he was a serial-killer in the making. It was obvious that, behind all the angry glares and harsh words, the other students were petrified of him.

Blaise grabbed Dazai’s sleeve and tugged him to the left when he started to turn down the wrong hall.

“You alright?”

Dazai frowned. “I’m fine.” It wasn’t like the other students had *done* anything. Just stared at him and flinched when he got too close. Though the air in the Slytherin common rooms was positively hostile, even Pansy hadn’t done anything too forward last night. But that didn’t mean Dazai wasn’t constantly on edge from the alienation.

That was how these things started: *small.* And then it would blow up in his face. Street gangs worked in the same way, right before they imploded in on themselves, or the Port Mafia crushed them under their boot.

“Are you sure?”

Dazai tilted his head. Blaise was watching him with an oddly serious expression that Dazai didn’t trust for a second.

“Sure. The classroom is just up here, isn’t it?” He redirected.

Blaise hummed, sounding more thoughtful than impressed. “You’re finally learning how to navigate the school?”

“It’s the classroom next to Quirrell’s,” Dazai answered instead. “I remember where that one is.”

“Oh, good. If you learned how to navigate, you wouldn’t need me anymore.”

Dazai shot him a playfully aghast look. He leaned forward, pressing well into Blaise’s chest. “That’s not true, Blaise! You’re my confidant! My second in command! Don’t sell yourself short!”

Blaise let out a breathy laugh, then shook his head.

They came around a final corner, then walked straight into the DADA room through the open door. Quite a few students were already there. Their eyes shot up, widened when they saw who entered, then snapped back to their desks in less than a second. It looked like this class was shared between Gryffindors and Slytherins, Dazai noted. He spotted a few familiar faces at the front of the class. Neville, Ron, and an over-eager Hermione sat in the very front row.

Hermione waved a kind hello, but was at once stopped by a frantic-looking Neville.

Draco and Pansy were seated together near the middle. Draco’s gaze didn’t even raise to meet his. Dazai filed that away for a later conversation. Pansy sneered, then turned her focus back to her conversation with Draco.

Dazai rolled his eyes and chose a seat in the far back corner. Blaise trailed after him.

As Blaise started to cover his desk in Lockhart’s books, Dazai leaned into his desk for a brief respite. He yawned into the wood.

“You didn’t bring your books,” Blaise noted blankly.

Dazai shook his head. “Those things are worthless.”

Blaise raised a brow. “If you say so.” He pulled out another book and set it atop an ever-growing pile. By the time he was finished, the stack of books towered over his head.

Dazai snorted and contemplated knocking the stack over, but held back. Such a loud noise would only turn heads, and Dazai didn’t want the attention. He rubbed the tiredness out of his eyes and sat up just in time for Professor Lockhart to come strolling into the classroom.

Lockhart’s hair seemed to shine as he walked. His cloak flashed around his heels. He came to a stop at the front of the room, swiped a copy of *Travels with Trolls* off of Neville’s desk, then charmed the class with a wink. Held up beside him, a photo of Lockhart on the book’s cover winked back.

“Gilderoy Lockhart,” he introduced, fatuous charm oozing off of his every word, “Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of Witch Weekly’s Most-Charming-Smile Award—but I don’t talk about that. I didn’t get rid of the Bandon Banshee by smiling at her!” He laughed, sounding excessively pleased with himself.

Just as the introduction drew a scowl across Dazai’s face, most of the class could offer only a weak smile in return. However, a few students—those ordered near the very front, mostly—beamed ear-to-ear. Dazai noted with some interest that it was mostly Gryffindor students who were hanging onto Lockhart’s every word. Slytherins, on the other hand, merely watched with frowns on their faces. Dazai recalled Lucius had regarded the author similarly.

Annoyingly, Dazai noticed that Hermione was among the enamored students.

“I see you all have bought a complete set of my books,” Lockhart said, gaze sweeping around the room. His eyes passed around the room, skipping from one student to the next without any hint of recognition. Dazai sunk low in his desk, hoping to avoid Lockhart’s searching eyes.

Lost cause, Dazai thought bitterly.

Time seemed to freeze as Lockhart and Dazai locked eyes.

It was silent for a second. Lockhart’s ever-present grin seemed to falter somewhat. Then, it came back with ten-times the intensity. Dazai raised a brow.

“Ah! Not *everyone* brought their books, it seems,” Lockhart said in that annoyingly chipper voice of his.

Every eye in the room followed his gaze to where Dazai was attempting to hide behind his desk. Realizing that ducking lower would be useless now, Dazai sighed and sat up straight.

“I should have known. Can a demon like yourself even read?” Lockhart laughed. This time, quite a few titters also rose up among the students. Now that they had a common enemy, it seemed Lockhart’s stock was rising. Dazai could pinpoint the exact second the professor realized this as well. “Only, I *know* that I signed each and every one of your books this year—a secret fan, are we? Where are your books, Demon?”

Dazai rapped his fingers against the table. “I didn’t bring them, Sir.”

Lockhart’s smile froze in place, then sharpened. “No? Do you think yourself better than your classmates? Above reading and doing homework? I’d expect nothing less from someone—no, *something* like yourself.”

“It’s true that Dazai never did his homework last year, either...” someone whispered.

“And he still passed first year?”

“I think the professors were just scared they’d be next if they flunked him!”

“Don’t worry, children, your favorite and most handsome professor—” he paused, as if waiting for a round of applause that never came, “—yours truly, will protect you from this demon. No need to fear. Even a monster like this is no match for a wizard of my caliber.”

Whispers echoed around the classroom. Dazai didn’t bother tracing them to their source. Lockhart’s too-bright smile had Dazai’s shoulders raising defensively. Just like last time, the author had a knack for rallying people around him. Annoyance and unease rising in him, Dazai’s hands stilled on the table.

“I already read the books, is all,” Dazai cut in before the professor could really get going. Lockhart’s eyes snapped to him. The professor blinked rapidly, looking a mix of dumbfounded and slightly worried at Dazai’s light tone. “Well, I skimmed them,” he amended.

“There’s no need to try and save face,” Lockhart scolded, grinning when Pansy and a few others giggled. “Perhaps you not having your books is a sign! I’m sure everyone here agrees: things would be better off if you hadn’t even come to Hogwarts this year. It just isn’t safe.”

Dazai frowned. His expression only darkened further when he heard numerous Gryffindors and Slytherins agreeing. “I don’t want trouble,” he tried to soothe.

“The *demon* doesn’t want trouble? Absurd! If you didn’t want trouble, you shouldn’t have harassed me at Flourish and Blotts. Declared war and everything—”

“*You* declared war on *me*,” Dazai said. His voice went unheard under Lockhart’s spiel.

“—it was really quite rude. No class at all. But!” Lockhart placed a protective hand on the nearest student’s shoulder, which just-so-happened to be Hermione’s. Hermione flushed bright red and looked as though she might faint. “If you must insist on your devilish games, then I will remain here to protect the other students from you. Isn’t that right, dear?”

Hermione nodded frantically, an awed grin on her face. Dazai wondered if she even knew what she was agreeing too, starstruck like that.

“There are no games,” Dazai raised his hands placatingly. He was growing a little irritated, now. Everything he said, Lockhart ignored, responding instead with some his hero-complex nonsense. “I didn’t bring your books because I didn't feel they had any value. Consider it an act of great restraint that I didn’t just throw them away on the spot. You’ll have to write a better book, if you want me to lug it around everywhere I go.” Then, with a cheery smile, he added, “Can we get on with class now, Mr. Lockhart, Sir?”

A hush ran across the class as everyone turned back to Lockhart for his response.

Lockhart’s brow twitched.

“Clearly, you didn’t actually read any of my novels, otherwise you would understand that my triumphs are very informative. In fact—” he grabbed something from his desk, then began to sweep around the room distributing something. Seeing as Dazai was in the very back, he arrived at that table last. A thick packet of paper landed in front of him. “—I thought we’d

start today with a little quiz. Nothing to worry about! Just to check how well you've read my books and how much you've taken in."

Dazai blinked at Lockhart slowly, then turned down to the papers.

What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color? the first question read.

"You have 30 minutes," Lockhart told the class.

Are you an idiot? Dazai answered.

Then, pressing his finger to his chin in thought, he added, "everyone may consult their books. Unless you didn't bring them, of course. Then, I suppose, you'll simply fail. Perhaps I'll even give out detention to everyone who fails. I'd take away house points, but the other Slytherins already suffer enough, given the situation with their housemate. I'm very generous like that, you know."

At the front of the classroom, Hermione's quill met paper and immediately began to scrawl answer after answer down. She didn't consult the book once. Seeming to realize that Dazai and Lockhart's back-and-forth was over (ended with both parties smiling threateningly at one another), the rest of the students pried open their books and began answering.

Blaise grabbed the first book off the stack and started sliding it closer to Dazai, when Lockhart cleared his throat. "No sharing books!"

With an apologetic look, Blaise turned to his own test instead.

Dazai looked back to Lockhart. The professor was smiling at him smugly, a single brow raised as if to say, *'what now, Demon?'*

Dazai's first thought was, *I'm not taking this test.*

Immediately following that thought was, *that's as much permission to nap as I'm going to get from Lockhart.*

With a loud and intentional yawn, Dazai lowered himself into the table. He crossed his arms under him like a pillow and shut his eyes. He didn't bother to lift his head even when Lockhart choked on his spit. The man's insulted face was probably quite amusing, but he had a point to prove.

When the thirty minutes were up, Dazai stretched back with a yawn.

He let out a sigh as the tension in his back slipped away. Around him, Dazai noticed several students shooting him a mixture of looks. They ranged from angry, to insulted, to confused. A few faces—Ron's among them—looked almost amused.

Lockhart looked anything but.

He collected up all of the papers, then returned to the front of the room to read over them quickly. When he reached Dazai's paper, he let out a long breath. "Now, now. Some of you

didn't even try!" He took out Dazai's perfectly blank page, and waved it so the whole class could see. "Or perhaps demons really can't read, after all!"

Again, a few members of the class chuckled.

Dazai purposefully ignored them. Everyone in the class of any value knew that Dazai spent nearly as much time as Hermione in the library, anyway. Still, the students' reactions prickled self-consciously at the back of his neck.

"Hardly any of you remembered my favorite color is lilac," Lockhart tutted, swiftly moving on, "I say so in *Year with the Yeti!* And a few of you need to read *Wanderings with Werewolves* more carefully. I clearly say in chapter 12 that my ideal birthday gift would be harmony between all magic and non-magic people—though I wouldn't say no to a large bottle of Ogden's old fire whiskey."

Dazai blinked, honestly a little surprised at Lockhart's lack of magical prejudice. Although, that did explain why the other Slytherin students didn't seem as interested in Lockhart's jokes and charm. Well—unless they were poking fun of Dazai, that was.

"But Miss Hermione," Lockhart continued, unknowing of Dazai's silent realization, "knew my secret ambition is to rid the world of evil and market my own range of haircare potions. Good girl!" He continued to flip through her paper, then proceeded to loudly congratulate her on full marks and award Gryffindor ten points.

He continued to talk for quite a while after, telling the class who did the best (Hermione practically trembled with pride), who did the worst (Dazai's quill was still in his bag, unused), and which questions were actually trick questions ("Most of you were correct in saying that my first published work was this one here," he held up a book in example, "but actually, I won a published poetry contest when I was just ten-years old!").

Dazai started to sink back into his seat, the attention finally slipping off him, when suddenly Lockhart announced for the whole class to hear:

"Now, as for our resident Demon..."

Dazai bit his lip. He couldn't believe he was actually going to respond to that title. "Yes, Professor?"

"Detention this Saturday at three," he said, grin somewhere between perfectly charming and sadistically amused, "for failure to answer even a single question and for being incredibly rude to your betters."

Dazai blinked.

"I'm busy on Saturday," he said. It wasn't a lie—Lockhart had managed to pick possibly the only time on Saturday that he already had plans: Remedial Magics with Professor Snape. "I have class at that time."

Lockhart's laugh was booming and his expression one oozing condescension. "Trying to weasel your way out of detention? Someone thinks highly of themselves." He winked to the class. "For that, I'll extend your detention by another hour. Arrive here at two."

"He's telling the truth, Sir," Blaise piped up. Lockhart's eyes snapped to him.

"Hm? There's no need to defend the demon, my boy. I won't let him hurt you."

Blaise sat with perfect posture and a watchful gaze, but his expression was blank, almost bored. "Dazai has an extra class on Saturdays. You can check his schedule yourself, if you don't believe us."

Dazai nodded. He nearly reached into his bag to bring said schedule out, but stopped when he heard Lockhart click his tongue.

"How sad, that one student can manipulate another so easily. Truly awful." He shook his head, morose. "But don't worry, students. I don't play favorites. Dazai Osamu won't be slipping out of his punishment so easily."

Dazai heard Pansy chortle. A few others made sounds of vague agreement, though many students said nothing at all.

"Just ask Professor Snape—" Dazai began to protest.

"Moving on," Lockhart interrupted, a pleased smile on his face when Dazai's mouth instinctively snapped shut.

He reached behind his desk and withdrew a large, cloth-covered cage. Immediately, Dazai could feel a buzz of magical energy coming from within the cage. He squinted at it, but was unable to recognize the magical signature. "Now be warned! It is my job to arm you against the foulest creatures known to wizard kind. You may find yourself facing your worst fears in this room. Know only that no harm can befall you whilst I am here—be that from magical creatures or a particularly evil classmate." Here, we winked conspiratorially in Dazai's direction. "All I ask is that you remain calm."

Dazai had yet to take his eyes off of the cage. He leaned forward slightly, hoping to parse out what sort of charmed artifact or creature was locked there. Unfortunately, no amount of peering or tilting could make sense of the violently jittery magic behind the cloth. The tight jumble of unfamiliar magical signature felt almost manic.

It turned his stomach more than Lockhart's saccharine smile did.

"I must ask you not to scream, as it may provoke them," Lockhart instructed.

Some kind of magical creature, then, Dazai reasoned. And not a happy one, if the magical signature was anything to go by. He fell back into the seat at once. Blaise shot him a curious glance.

Around them, the whole class seemed to be holding its breath—be that in anticipation or worry. Neville held a book in front of his as if it were a shield.

Looking pleased with their reactions, Lockhart gripped the cloth and tore it off in one swift motion.

“Freshly caught Cornish Pixies!” Lockhart announced.

A Gryffindor Dazai didn’t recognize laughed.

“They don’t look dangerous, do they? Don’t be so sure,” Lockhart condescended.

Certainly, the pixies didn’t appear to be very menacing—surely not as awful as Lockhart had described. There were about a dozen or so small, blue creatures locked in the cage. The blue was so iridescent and shining that Dazai had to wonder if they were poisonous just to *look at.* The pixies were mostly humanoid in appearance, ignoring their massive ears, antennae, and too-long limbs. Each pixie couldn’t have been larger than perhaps eight inches.

While the class seemed to have written off Lockhart’s earlier description as an overexaggerating, Dazai wasn’t so sure. Looking at the Cornish Pixies showed a small-boned fairy-like creature. But Dazai was still hung up on their magical signature—like a rapidly beating heart, frantic and shaking. It didn’t feel dangerous, per say. Just... unpredictable. No one else seemed able to sense the magic’s violent nature, however.

“Hhhhh!!”

“Screeee!!”

Suddenly, the pixies started *screaming.*

Blue hands grabbed at the cage’s bars and shook. The whole thing wobbled dangerously.

Their shrieks were so high-pitched, it was nearly metallic, the sound banging around Dazai’s skull.

“Let’s see what you make of them!”

Dazai, who had yet to fully take his eyes off the pixies, suddenly snapped back to Lockhart.

...what? He couldn’t seriously—

Without even a moment’s hesitation, Lockhart unlatched the cage and swung the door open.

Dazai’s eyes widened.

For just a split second, everyone in the class went dead still.

Then: *chaos.*

The pixies shot out of the cage as impossibly fast blue blurs. Dazai was barely able to keep his eye on one fairy as it bolted around the room.

It bashed into a window, shattering glass over their heads and across the floor. They tore books from the shelves, threw ink bottles at walls, and ripped up papers. The pixies pulled at students' ears and tugged at their clothes. Poor Neville was being lifted by his ears a foot off the ground.

"Round them up quickly!" Lockhart shouted over their screams. "They're only pixies!"

Pixies swirled around the air, messing up the room as if a tornado. Papers flew overhead.

Someone's wand was thrown out the window, and Lockhart had to dive under his desk to avoid a stack of his own books tossed his way.

It was pure chaos!

Dazai slumped in his chair, watching the proceedings with wide, blinking eyes. Most of the students had not escaped the pixies' torment, but those who had were now taking shelter under the tables. He considered joining them for safety.

A pixie shot around the room, manic laughter on its lips. It seemed to spot Dazai and Blaise, and a huge, pointed grin split across its face.

It flew at them, a bolt out of a nail gun. Small hands reaching. A blue, nipping torpedo straight at them!

They flinched and prepared for the worst.

But at the last second, it let out a horrified shrill and zipped away to pester a different group of students instead.

Blaise and Dazai shared a glance.

It had run away from them. Terrified of even touching—

Oh. Touching him.

Dazai realized what happened at once: the Cornish Pixies could sense No Longer Human. They were smart enough to keep their distance lest they be nullified. The mountain troll last year may have been too dumb to turn-tail, but clearly the pixies had some self-preservation rattling around in those tiny heads of theirs.

Blaise must have reached a similar conclusion, because he not-so-subtly pushed himself into Dazai's side.

A massive chandelier suddenly crashed onto the floor. Metal splintered off and skidded across the tile. Dazai flinched at the incredible sound. Students screamed all around him as the pixies continued to wreak violent havoc on anyone unfortunate enough to not have made it to shelter.

"Bet everyone is wishing they were friends with you now," Blaise commented—no need to speak quietly under his breath with all the screaming and screeching. Sitting with Dazai, he

had also avoided any injury to his person or damage to his belongings. Between the two of them, there was a miniature oasis in the corner of Lockhart's classroom that no pixie dared breach.

"Someone catch them!" Lockhart begged from under his desk.

Dazai's laugh tinkled along with shattering glass.

Chapter End Notes

i think every chapter so far, someone has left a comment saying it was their birthday. so. who's turn is it this week?? happy birthday lol

thanks for reading! see yall next week!

next up: my "snape and dazai" agenda expands into my "pomfrey and snape and dazai" agenda

The Sensing Stone

Chapter Summary

Dazai's first Remedial Magics Lesson.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Throughout the week, Dazai would occasionally catch sight of a pixie's blue blur in the middle of a random Hogwarts hallway. It would be gone just as fast as it appeared. A few of the pesky creatures had evidently taken up residence in the building's long corridors. When Dazai told Blaise as much, his friend burst out in uncharacteristically expressive laughter.

"Professor Lockhart still hasn't caught them all?" He chuckled, shifting closer to Dazai. "Don't let them near me, please. I'd rather my ears not be pulled on... Neville's ears are still red from the other day."

Dazai grinned. "Then don't wander too far."

They shared a friendly look—one that bubbled warmly in Dazai's chest. When it was just the two of them, Dazai could almost convince himself that everyone here wasn't his enemy. Unfortunately, they weren't alone often. Between classes and the halls, Hogwarts was buzzing with first-week energy. Students chatted and wandered about seemingly all throughout the days. Even in the Slytherin common rooms, Dazai couldn't catch a break. Pansy must have rallied all of Slytherin against him by now—not that she needed bother. The Daily Prophet was doing a good enough job of that on its own.

"Speaking of Professor Lockhart," Blaise said quietly, leaning back into his chair. The corner of the library they had settled down in was private, but Madam Pince would still chide them if they spoke too loudly. "What are you doing about his detention? It's in..." he paused, eyes flashing to a clock on the wall, "eight minutes."

"So is my class," Dazai said.

Blaise hummed, considering the conflict.

Dazai had attempted on numerous occasions to explain to Lockhart that he wouldn't be able to attend a detention at that time. Every attempt, without fail, Lockhart would tut-tut-tut at him for trying to get out of detention. Dazai grew tired of it after the third day. Since then, he simply let Lockhart go on with his nonsense. Dazai had given up on trying to explain himself. The professor would just have to deal.

Feeling petty, Dazai at once decided that if Lockhart wasn't going to listen to reason, then he wouldn't listen during lecture.

Needless to say, Dazai had accrued three more detentions on top of his first.

"Well," Dazai said, leaning forward to rest his head on an open palm, "it can't be helped. I'll show up to class and skip detention. Snape and Professor Lockhart can fight amongst themselves about it after."

Blaise nodded agreement. Then, indicating the time again with a shift of his eyes, he asked, "Do you need help finding your way to the infirmary?"

"I think I can manage." Dazai shrugged off the offer. He had a general idea of how to find the infirmary from last year, assuming the hallways hadn't rearranged themselves since. "Unless you want to tag along? I might get lost and starve to death!"

"On your way to meeting with Professor Snape? That won't happen, Dazai." Blaise raised a brow. "No thanks. Try not to be late."

"We'll see!" He winked, then leaned back into his chair without a care. The clock ticked overhead, but Dazai didn't budge.

Blaise shot him a look.

"On second thought, maybe I will come with. Just to make sure you don't end up skipping class and detention *both."*

"Or starving to death," Dazai added in for him. *"Ah,* Blaise is no fun. It wouldn't be on purpose, anyway. Hogwarts doesn't make any sense." He huffed. "I need a map."

"I don't think any exists, since the stairs are always—" here, Blaise made a spinning motion with his finger.

Dazai sighed, having already reached the same conclusion himself. Navigation of Hogwarts was hopelessly illogical, and even a map couldn't make sense of that.

Getting to his feet, Dazai turned an eye down on Blaise. After a second, his friend rose as well. They gathered up their things—quills, paper, and a few textbooks. Once everything was collected, Blaise and Dazai walked past the many rows and rows of books. Dazai waved pleasantly to Madame Pince as they left. She barely looked at him.

As they walked, Dazai let his eyes wander around. People were giving him odd looks and keeping their distance. It wasn't new at this point, but it still put Dazai on edge. He cast a surreptitious glance to Blaise. The other boy wore only his signature bored look, giving no indication that he was at all put off by the attention.

"Go home, Demon!" Someone jeered.

Dazai's head snapped in their direction, but he couldn't make out who exactly had shouted at him.

His eyes eventually settled on a particular crowd of students. They shuffled nervously under his gaze. Dazai recognized a few of them—he had seen them talking with Pansy earlier in the week. That told Dazai all he needed to know about their opinion of him.

“Ignore them.” Blaise poked his side with an elbow.

“Kind of hard to do when we all live together,” Dazai said with a chuckle. He looked to Blaise, then back again to the crowd. “Are people bothering you too? You’re practically glued to my side. I bet they think we’re in cahoots.”

Blaise hummed, considering Dazai’s words for a moment before responding. “It’s fine. And we *are* in cahoots, anyway.”

Dazai frowned. “Want me to teach them a lesson, so they’ll leave you alone?” He mimed a stabbing motion in the air.

“Don’t stab people. Besides, that would only make things worse for you,” Blaise said, unimpressed. “If people give me strange looks for talking with you... anyway, I don’t mind.”

“What a strange thing to say,” Dazai said, briefly meeting Blaise’s eyes before looking away just as fast. He was wearing one of those too-honest expressions again. “Blaise sure is weird.”

As they started walking up a tall, wooden staircase, the entire thing suddenly kicked to life below them. It spun, rotating from one floor to another. Dazai startled, gripping at the handrail with two gloved hands. Blaise, who had evidently anticipated the staircase’s sudden change in trajectory, merely continued walking up it.

“They should replace these things with elevators,” Dazai grumbled. Only once he was sure of his footing did he hurry to keep up with Blaise.

If Blaise heard him, the other boy didn’t let on. More loudly, Dazai asked a question that had been bothering him since the first day of class, “Draco isn’t avoiding you too, is he?”

Blaise raised a brow. He stepped off the staircase once it finally stopped spinning, then waited a few seconds for Dazai to do the same. “He isn’t.”

Dazai smiled. At least that hadn’t gone awry. “I haven’t had a chance to talk to him since Diagon Alley,” he explained, “I was thinking—”

“Diagon Alley?”

Dazai blinked.

“Right. I didn’t tell you about that.”

He opened his mouth to explain, but stopped just short of saying anything.

Should he tell Blaise about his meeting with the Malfoys? That would first require telling Blaise about the Port Mafia. And Mori had specifically told Dazai not to reveal the mafia’s

involvement in Hogwarts' affairs. He *could* tell Blaise. He trusted Blaise. *But...*

Mori's voice echoed in his head, *"You got too sentimental. Too attached to those school children."*

"I ran into him on my way out of the bank," Dazai said suddenly. "I didn't expect to see him there. Did Blaise think I was replacing him?" It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the full truth either.

Blaise looked at him for a second, expression considering. Abruptly, he shook his head, then turned his gaze back to the hallway stretching out before them. "Did you want me to ask him something for you?"

"I'd rather talk to him myself," Dazai said, unapologetic and blunt.

Blaise turned up a brow. "That might be difficult, seeing as he's avoiding you."

"That's true. I'm bad for his reputation," Dazai said. Hanging around with Draco would only stain the Malfoy family's name, thanks to the Daily Prophet. But as they walked past a moving painting, then a suit of armor, then a tapestry, Dazai was suddenly struck with a memory. "Say, the club room we used last year is still around, isn't it?"

"Probably... why?"

Dazai grinned. "Can you ask Draco to meet me there?"

Blaise paused to consider the request. Upon realizing what Dazai meant, he hummed. "A place like that, no one else will come barging in," he noted.

"Exactly!" Dazai clapped. "And he won't have to worry about anyone else seeing us together. Draco's precious pride remains intact."

Blaise's lip twitched upward in unmistakable humor. "I can do that. Good idea, Boss."

"You're welcome to tag along, too. Make it a whole gang reunion."

"We'd have to invite the others for that," Blaise commented. He brought a finger to his lips, thoughtful. "It's been a while since we were all together."

Dazai nodded. It had been even longer for him, having left Hogwarts in February rather than the expected May. And although Dazai had met up with everyone at least once since Diagon Alley, their interactions had been scarce. A wave to the twins in the hall. A few brief words to Hermione as they passed in the library. A joking remark to Ron in potions before grouping up with Blaise, instead. What with Hogwarts' increasingly hostile attitude towards him, Dazai's movement had been a bit limited. It wouldn't do to have a gang this disconnected.

"I'll snag the Gryffindors myself, if you grab Draco," Dazai instructed. He pulled some authority into his voice—not that it was really necessary. "We'll meet up tomorrow before dinner in the club room."

Well, he supposed it was more of a gang room now. Or would that be a *gang office?* Either way, between Pansy and the rest of the school, Dazai doubted the Loyalty Club would be meeting there again anytime soon.

“Sure,” Blaise said, easy-going as always.

As they turned another corner, the infirmary sign finally came into view. Standing beside the door, Snape had his arms crossed and a scowl written across his face. And for once, Dazai wasn’t the only person people were avoiding. All the other students in the hall, upon noticing the particularly dark expression Snape wore, apologized to the air and scampered away hastily.

“Ah... I’m not late, am I?”

Snape must have heard him ask, because the professor’s head snapped in their direction immediately.

“No,” Blaise said. He looked between Snape and Dazai. “I’ll leave you here, then. Good luck with class.”

“Good luck with Professor Snape, you mean.”

“Well. That too.” He shot another surreptitious glance the glaring professor’s way. “Come find me after class?” He asked quietly.

Dazai nodded.

“Try not to get lost,” Blaise said in parting, before turning on his heels to head back the way they came.

“Don’t get attacked by a pixie while I’m busy, Blaise!” Dazai called. A few students jumped at his shout.

Hearing this, Blaise’s eyes immediately shot from one end of the hall to the other, as if one of those blue maniacs would appear the second Dazai was gone. “...I’ll try my best.”

Dazai waited until Blaise disappeared around a corner before turning back to Snape.

The potion master, who had watched their exchange without making a sound, now snapped, “Are you done?”

“Bad day?” Dazai asked instead.

“Don’t be cheeky, boy,” Snape ground out. Then, pinching the bridge of his nose, he admitted, “I’m fed up from dealing with troublesome students all week. Yourself included.”

At those words, Dazai recalled the rather explosive potion he had brewed just yesterday in class. It was a real beauty—all snapping orange bubbles and corrosive, curling vapors. It had almost melted Dazai’s hand off when it burst a hole in the cauldron. Snape’s anger had been palpable. And, it seemed, that anger had yet to fade since.

Dazai resisted the urge to tease his professor, but decided against it at the last minute. Snape had a way of prying into Dazai's personal life and he didn't want to give the man any motivation to do so now. Moreover, it would be nice to have Snape happy with him when Lockhart inevitably complained about Dazai missing detention. Speaking of—

"You wouldn't happen to be on good terms with Professor Lockhart, would you, Sir?"

Snape narrowed a sharp gaze at him. "Why?" he asked, suspicion dripping off the word. "What have you done now?"

"Ah..." Dazai trailed off. "Nothing." Yet.

"Good. Let's keep it that way."

Dazai nodded, silently considering whether he should explain the detention situation to Snape or not.

Seeming to take Dazai's silence as question, Snape opened the door to the infirmary. He motioned Dazai in. "In. Otherwise I'll mark you tardy."

"But..." Lockhart was in his office right now, waiting for a student that wasn't ever going to show up. Should he mention..?

Well, Dazai would just let the cards fall where they may.

"Yes, Sir." he slipped past Snape and into the infirmary.

The infirmary looked just like Dazai remembered it. Soft, white light peeled in from the windows. Cots lined the wall, topped with white sheets and sun-warmed pillows. All of the beds were empty at the moment. The infirmary always smelled of linen and herbs. On the shelf, row upon row of colorful, magical cure-alls were lined up. Magic oozed off of them, but Dazai was still unable to recognize what they did from sense alone.

The only thing Dazai didn't recognize was the massive crack in the wall beside one of the cots. It was big enough he could see through to the plumbing behind—including what looked to be an infested mess of spider's web. Dazai had to stop himself from laughing. That was *definitely* the prank Fred and George had mentioned on the train! A crack in the wall and exploding pillows. Dazai eyed the pillows there, now. If they were still charmed, and he laid down on them... his head would just blow to bits! Instant!

Or would that be too painful a way to die..?

Movement caught his eye.

Madam Pomfrey was standing by a long, low table. As always, she wore a tall, red and white robe. Curly grey hair hid below the matron's cloth on her head. Squinting, she held up a tincture of blue-green liquid, swirled it, then set it back down. Pomfrey wrote something down, then lifted a different potion for inspection.

Snape cleared his throat.

"Oh! There you are, dears," Pomfrey jumped. She set the vial down and turned to face them. Her eyes found Dazai first, then flicked to Snape. Upon seeing him, her lips immediately quirked up into an amused smile. "Still have that headache, Severus? Did you take the medicine I gave you?"

Snape grunted, shutting the door behind him. He didn't humor Pomfrey with a response. "Where will you have him sit?"

Pomfrey, evidently unperturbed by Snape's frowning demeanor, merely gesture to the cots. "Anywhere is fine. Let me just—"

Snape gave Dazai a light shove, urging him forward.

Dazai sat down on the first bed he saw. Snape stayed standing above him. The whole arrangement felt very familiar.

Meanwhile, Pomfrey had crossed the room and vanished into her office. Not a second later, however, she returned with a brown cardboard box trapped between her hands.

"How are you feeling, dear?"

Dazai eyed the box curiously as she set it down on the table beside an empty glass cup. Though he was unable to see what was inside the box, Dazai knew it was something magical. The item's magical signature wasn't very descriptive—it lacked the telltale *snap* of incendio or the expectant *buzz* of Cornish Pixies. But Dazai could still sense a kind of magic within. Interested, he leaned forward to try and steal a peek.

"Behave," Snape told him.

Dazai glanced up at him, sheepish.

"Dear?"

Dazai shook himself out of his thoughts. Right. He'd been asked something. "I'm fine."

Then, recalling some of their previous interactions, Dazai hastily looked down to check—

Good—his gloves and sleeves covered up any bandages. He was not in the mood to humor questions on his scars today. *Or any day, really.*

Seemingly content with such a non-committal answer, Pomfrey merely hummed, "that's good to hear."

Without further ado, she reached into the box and pulled out a small, round object. It was covered over with a light blue cloth. And, now that he could see it, Dazai was sure: this was the object he was sensing. Although, looking closer, there were at least a few other magical objects still in the box.

Unable to control his curiosity any longer, Dazai asked, "What is that?"

Pomfrey set the mysterious item down on the table. “After I reached out to St. Mungo’s last year, they also became quite interested in your condition,” she explained.

Immediately, those words spawned some trepidation in Dazai. He was trying to remain low-profile, at Mori’s request. Involving more people in his life was only asking for trouble.

...Well, as low-profile as one could get when the Daily Prophet was writing daily articles about you.

Dazai blinked out of his thoughts when he realized Snape’s eyes were on him, brows furrowed. “They don’t have your name, if that’s what you’re concerned about.”

“Oh, of course not!” Pomfrey shook her head, looking apologetic for not having specified earlier. “All St. Mungo’s knows is that a student from Hogwarts has an unknown magical ailment. We take student confidentiality very seriously here. Unless there is an emergency, you shouldn’t have to even step foot in St. Mungo’s.”

Dazai nodded. That was actually good know. He felt himself relax a bit. The closer people investigated No Longer Human, the closer Dazai was to spilling the beans about the Port Mafia. He could outmaneuver Snape and Pomfrey well enough. But a whole hospital full of magical-medical specialists? Dazai would need to maneuver that situation *very* carefully.

“That’s good. I’m not the most popular, these days,” despite the gravity of his words, Dazai’s voice carried a certain humor with it. “They would have turned you down if you used my name.”

The lines of Snape’s shoulders immediately snapped straight. Shock was written across Pomfrey and Snape’s expressions as if they hadn’t expected Dazai to broach the topic.

“I should hope not,” Pomfrey said, certain and sharp.

That’s right, Dazai realized with a start. If anyone knew the truth about what happened with Quirrell, it would be these two. Pomfrey had cared for him after Dazai and Quirrell’s fight, and Snape had spoken with him shortly after the affair. Unlike the rest of magical society, Pomfrey and Snape had (most of) the full picture.

“Now,” Pomfrey continued, gesturing towards the box in a motion that shook off any of her remaining anger, “St. Mungo’s sent me a few things they thought might help to get a baseline on your condition. Rather than have you shipped off the hospital, I managed to convince the staff there that I could do so here. All it took was some... encouragement.”

Dazai raised a brow. He didn’t want to know what the matron’s idea of *encouragement* was, using a tone like that.

“Compared to muggle hospitals, St. Mungo’s utilizes a wide variety of magical artifacts and items in their practice. Certains spells are often used to diagnose curses; artifacts used to get an idea of the patient’s mental state.”

Dazai nodded along, listening with great interest. Magical medicine seemed a lot less invasive than muggle medicine, with their scalpels and what-not. Dazai eyed the unknown, clothed item beside Pomfrey. Maybe he could steal it and gift it to Mori? As a doctor, he might appreciate it.

"For your first lesson," Snape said, grunting as he crossed the room to Pomfrey's side. His hand clapped down onto the strange object. "We thought it most prudent to get a grasp on your limitations and abilities. Once I know exactly what you are capable of, we can work on safely training your magic."

Dazai's eyes fell again to the orb-like object. "This artifact," he tilted his chin in its direction, "will tell you how much magic I can use before I pass out?"

"Not quite." Amusement twinkled in Pomfrey's eyes.

At the same time, Snape asked, "have you read any of your textbook yet? *The Biology of Magic."*

"Most of it," Dazai told them. It was an interesting read, for sure. Dazai hesitated just shy of asking Snape for recommendations of similar books. Perhaps, if he delved deep enough into the subject, he might find at least one mentioning of Special Abilities. If not, at least Dazai would have a better grasp on how magic interacted with organic material. Seeing as he could destroy that connection with a single touch, it felt prudent to learn.

Maybe he'd ask Hermione for help looking, later.

Pomfrey and Snape shared a look and a silent communication.

Then, Snape pulled the cloth from the orb, revealing what lay underneath.

"What do you make of this?" Snape asked. There was an intentional pause in his voice, as though he were expecting one answer or another. Beside him, Pomfrey similarly watched for Dazai's response.

A crystalline orb sat on the table. It was no larger than a bowling ball and had a perfectly smooth body. *The Biology of Magic* didn't have pictures, so Dazai couldn't quite place what the item was. But looking at it...

It was certainly quite an interesting orb. It wasn't glass—the body not clear or transparent in the slightest. The orb was a bright, glowing white color. No—that wasn't right. The more Dazai looked, the more he realized it was closer to a milky-white. As if a swirl of clouds were spinning within its body. Pushed around by an invisible breeze, those strange clouds filled the entire orb. When Dazai squinted to get a clearer view, he realized there was something else inside as well. Something behind the clouds. *What was it..?*

"Well, boy?"

"It's an orb," Dazai said blankly.

He peered further into its depths, brows furrowing as his focus deepened. The clouds seemed to part, if only for a second. He caught another swirl of cloudy movement within. But it was too fast. Dazai needed to get closer to make anything out. Or maybe glasses. Everything was too blurry to see properly.

“What else do you notice about the orb?” Snape repeated, clearly unimpressed with Dazai’s first answer.

Did they want to know what was behind the clouds? Dazai leaned forward on his palms.

A splinter of motion behind the blurring white. Another swirl of clouds like the first. But darker. Like a storm cloud. Squirming, slithering...

A wash of white blotted the whole image out again.

“This is not a difficult question,” Snape snapped.

Dazai blinked repeatedly, feeling disoriented to be abruptly torn from his focus. A frown worked its way across his face. Snape could say whatever he wanted, but he wasn’t also working against No Longer Human. Just as he thought this, the clouds parted and his ability flared painfully in his skull.

Pomfrey elbowed Snape.

“What color do you see?” She asked Dazai gently.

“Oh,” Dazai said, glancing at the orb then back again. That was a much simpler question. Although... “Can’t you see for yourself? What kind of question is that?”

“Behave,” Snape reiterated. “And answer the question.”

“Severus, relax. This isn’t exactly a common object. Especially not to a muggleborn like Mr. Dazai.”

In the orb, clouds continued to spin around lazily. Tired white and stormy gray.

Regardless of what Snape and Pomfrey were trying to get at, the answer was obvious. The color of the clouds was unmistakably white. It was what lied behind them that had Dazai considering his answer more carefully. The thing behind the fog was so dark as to almost be black. But it only came in brief flashes when the clouds deigned to part. Hesitantly, Dazai decided, “it’s white, isn’t it?”

There was no response.

Dazai tore his gaze away from the orb.

Pomfrey and Snape stared at him with wide, disbelieving eyes. Their jaws dropped open.

However, Snape’s gape quickly settled into a peeved scowl. He leveled Dazai with a particularly harsh glare.

“Quit playing games, boy. What *color?”*

So they wanted what was behind the clouds, after all. Dazai felt himself growing annoyed now, as well. They could have said so earlier and saved him the trouble. “Black, then.”

Blood rushed to Snape’s face, bitterly angry over something or another. He took a stomping step forward. “Listen here—!”

Dazai flinched.

Immediately, Snape froze in place.

Still standing by the orb, Pomfrey made a sound of concern—one that had Snape taking a deep, calming breath. His hands flexed at his side, but he didn’t take another step forward.

“This is important,” Snape said, words slow and intentional but still retaining that hint of a growl it always seemed to have. “Stop attempting to guess at the correct answer.”

“There is no correct answer,” Pomfrey added with a subvert glance in Snape’s direction. She cleared her throat. Then, with careful and slow movements, lowered herself down into the cot directly across from Dazai. “Severus, perhaps it would be helpful if you explained everything first.”

Dazai looked between them, then back to the orb.

A white mist covered the darkness within. He wasn’t lying, so why did they think he was?

His eyes narrowed and his shoulders squared back.

Dazai was starting to think he should have just kept his mouth shut.

Snape took in another long breath. With it, most of his anger melted away. Still, tension lined his entire body. “Tell me what color you see first, then I will explain what this stone is.” He rolled his shoulders back. With them, the last of his anger rolled away as well. “Poppy is right—there are no right or wrong answers. There is no need to guess at what we would like to hear.”

The frown on Dazai’s lips didn’t let up. He brought his hands together, aiming to pick at the loose flesh of his fingers, but stopped short when his gloves got in the way. Instead, his hands fell limply and uselessly at his sides.

“Mr. Dazai—”

“White,” he repeated. “That’s the truth.”

Snape and Pomfrey stared at him, as if expecting a *“Gotcha!”* to follow.

None did.

“I wouldn’t lie about this, considering I don’t even know what *this* is,” Dazai said, emphasizing his ignorance with a pout. Uncomfortable under their intense stares, Dazai’s fingers kneaded against the blanket for a second before falling deathly still.

Pomfrey blinked once, then twice. Slowly, her eyes widened as if in realization. A wave of her hand sent a quill rising into the air. It flew to her, whereupon she hastily scrawled down a frantic note onto her pad of paper.

Beside her, Snape’s face had gone perfectly blank.

“Does it change color depending on who’s looking?” Dazai asked, having guessed as much a few moments earlier.

His question seemed to tear Snape from his thoughts. “In *The Biology of Magic*, this item is referred to as a Sensing Stone,” he explained. “The color a wizard sees within the Stone correlates directly to their Magical Sensitivity.”

Dazai ruminated on that for a second. “What does it mean if it’s white, Sir? Is that very sensitive?”

The matron looked up from her notes. “Darker colors, like blue or red, indicate a very low sensitivity to magic. That’s something you might see in a muggle. The majority of witches and wizards are able to see a color somewhere between orange and yellow. I myself can see yellow.”

It didn’t escape Dazai’s notice that Pomfrey had neither mentioned white nor black. Both colors, a quick glance again revealed, he was currently able to see within the Sensing Stone. The tightness in Pomfrey’s eyes suggested that this was no mistake.

“Are you absolutely certain you see white?” Snape asked. He waited until Dazai looked up, locking eyes. “No color at all?”

Dazai tilted his whole body away from Snape’s blistering stare. Despite his obvious discomfort, however, Snape didn’t lighten up. A gravity Dazai couldn’t understand weighed heavy on the situation.

Dazai turned his focus back to the orb. Still milky white. Not a drop of color to be seen. Behind it, the black shadow moved. It wasn’t white, but it held just the same lack of vividness. Dazai shook his head. “It’s white...”

Pomfrey’s quill stopped over her notes. “Is there something else?”

Silently, Dazai cursed himself. He hadn’t meant to trail off, but the Sensing Stone had captured his attention once again. The pull of a curious magic distracted him from the more pertinent conversation.

White—indicating a strong sensitivity to magic.

Black—indicating no magic at all.

No Longer Human itched behind Dazai's eyes, a contradiction. This strange thing he was seeing must have been a result of his ability, right? Dazai could think of no other conclusion. Though perhaps he was simply lacking in information. He resolved to prod for more context.

The clouds mixed.

"No, sorry. It's just white, Ma'am."

"Just white..." Snape scoffed to himself.

When Pomfrey returned to her note-taking, Dazai forcefully pried his eyes away from the Sensing Stone. "Professor Snape, what color do you see?"

Snape stared at him for a second before relenting with a sigh. "Yellow. The same as Poppy. I suspect most of your professor would see the same." At Dazai's curious expression, he continued, "Yellow is considered the upper-range of Magical Sensitivity. Being in a position of teaching magic, a professor must have a certain level of control over their subject."

That made sense. If a wizard could barely sense magic, they wouldn't have the skill to accurately control it, let alone teach others how to control it.

Dazai himself had very little control over magic, but sensing it? That was another matter entirely.

Based on that alone, Dazai had a pretty good guess as to what the colors in the Sensing Stone meant about him. Despite this, he still had to ask. "Just how sensitive to magic am I to see white?"

Snape crossed his arms, levelling Dazai with another long stare. "Theoretically."

Dazai blinked. "Theoretically..?"

"The ability to see anything in a Sensing Stone brighter than pale yellow is strictly theoretical," Snape said, drawing the words out carefully. "To date, no wizard has seen anything near to what you are describing."

"Ah..." Dazai's eyes flicked to the Stone again, then straight back to Snape before he could be drawn into its depths once more. "Is it too late to say I can just see yellow?"

To say Snape looked unamused would be an understatement.

Pomfrey scrawled a final remark onto paper before tuning back into the conversation. "I'd like to propose an experiment. Severus?"

The potions master nodded affirmation.

"Dazai, dear, I'm going to close the curtains around you," she explained, standing up. "I'll ask Severus to cast a few spells of different magical intensities. All you need to do is to let me know when you can sense the magic, okay?"

Dazai looked to Snape, who was already withdrawing a wand from his robe. There wasn't really any harm in this test. Moreover, Dazai was actually curious himself about just how far his magical sensitivity went compared to others. He nodded.

Pomfrey stood. She muttered an incantation, magic grabbing the curtains around Dazai's cot and swinging them mostly shut. Like this, Dazai's view of Snape and the Sensing Stone was entirely blocked. Pomfrey stood just at the edge of the cot, able to see both Snape and Dazai simultaneously. She gave Snape a "ready" gesture, then turned her full focus on Dazai.

"Alright, dear. Say something if you can sense Severus using magic."

"Does he even know what it *feels* like to sense around for magic?" Snape asked from nearby.

Pomfrey shot Dazai an apologetic look. "It might help to close your eyes, hun," she told him. "Try and focus on your surroundings. Since you can see white... Severus' magic will probably feel like a slight tingling to you. Maybe something a bit stronger."

Dazai hesitated, but after a few seconds, he forced his eyes shut. Darkness took over his vision. He placed both hands on his lap and curled his fingers over the hem of his robe.

The second he shut his eyes, he understood what Pomfrey meant when she said it might help. The magic around them—latent and aimless—suddenly become sharper; more vivid. Like he could pick out every biting sensation of magic, if he just focused hard enough. And what magic he felt in the Sensing Stone was at once clearer. He could see its position clearly in his mind's eye. The Stone's magical signature, which he had originally perceived as nondescript, now seemed to have an underlying distinctiveness to it. It felt dark and damp.

"Mr. Dazai, are you ready to start?"

He startled. This new and brilliantly clear sensation had distracted him from the present again. "Yes." Cheekily, he added, "go easy on me, Professor Snape, Sir."

Snape grunted.

Everything was perfectly still for a few seconds. Then...

A sudden boon of magic burst from where Snape's voice last came from. The air went from stillness to a thunderous explosion in zero-seconds flat. He jumped.

"Well, he felt that," Pomfrey said, laughter in her voice. "I think we *all* did, Severus. A little less now, please."

"Merely giving Mr. Dazai an example of what he should be sensing for." Dazai thought he heard a hint of humor in Snape's voice as well.

The ringing in the air abruptly died down.

Dazai let out a breath, trying to still his nerves.

With his eyes closed, Dazai felt too vulnerable. The only thing keeping him from curling into himself protectively was this newfound Magical Sensitivity. Now that Dazai's vision was absent, his sensitivity had increased ten-fold. When he focused, he could even feel the slight buzz of energy coming from Snape's inactive wand.

Magic roiled again.

"I felt that," Dazai said, keeping his eyes closed. He twitched at the sensation.

Pomfrey hummed.

A moment of pause, then another jolt of magic.

"Felt it."

Again.

"That, too."

And again.

"Mhm."

Snape continued casting spells, each one minutely less powerful than the last. Pomfrey's quill scratches were the only other sound in the infirmary during the tests. And the longer the tests drew on, the more frantic her writing became. Meanwhile, Dazai was running out of different ways to say "yes."

After the twenty-sixth spell, the spellcasting suddenly stopped.

"Are we done?" Dazai asked. He kept his eyes closed, still having a fairly good idea of where Snape was standing based on his wand's magical signature.

It was silent.

Dazai pried his eyes open.

Madam Pomfrey was hunched over her notes with wide eyes. "That's..."

Just out of sight, Snape drew in a staggering breath. "I can't put any less magic into that spell. Any less and I won't be casting at all."

Dazai heard footsteps, then Snape was tearing the curtains back with force. His eyes immediately zeroed in on Dazai.

"You could sense all of them," he said without inflection.

Dazai glanced to Pomfrey for confirmation before nodding. Every single spell Snape cast had been easy to sense. More than that—the difference in magical intensity was negligible at best.

Between the strongest and weakest spell, the only difference was that Dazai's skin buzzed a little less. At no point had he considered that Snape was barely using any magic at all.

"That should be—" Snape suddenly cut himself off.

Pomfrey carefully set her quill down. "He reacted promptly to every single cast." Her gaze slipped to the Sensing Stone, still a pearly white. "Mr. Dazai's Sensing Stone is white," she determined, breathless.

Dazai shifted in place. The quiet, serious looks Pomfrey and Snape kept sending one another were more than disconcerting. Even though he was, for once, just being honest, it felt like he'd mis-stepped somewhere. He'd been hoping not to back himself into a corner with an unsustainable lie, but it seemed the truth was just as absurd.

Snape seemed to be staring straight through his soul, dissecting him with two glaring eyes.

Mori, Dazai's brain whispered.

"Sir," Dazai said, forcefully shaking away the unwanted comparison, "what spell were you casting just now?"

Snape raised a single brow. *"Aqua Eructo.* The water-making spell."

Dazai nodded to himself. That explained why he couldn't recognize it—that wasn't a first-year spell. He mentally catalogued the spell's feeling in case it became relevant again later: cold and smooth, like an arctic lake. A quick glance to the table revealed that the once-empty glass there was now so full as to almost spill over.

Pomfrey consulted her notes one last time before looking up to meet Dazai's eyes. "I'll have to do some reading to confirm, but I think this has cleared up quite a lot about your condition."

Dazai blinked in surprise. "It did?" he asked. There was no way Pomfrey had gleaned information about No Longer Human from that exercise, but she looked certain of *something*. Snape was still looking stony and serious.

"Most wizards are not able to detect the presence of magic until it is significantly more concentrated," Pomfrey explained, this time looking between both Snape and Dazai as she spoke. This was as much an explanation for student as it was for teacher, it seemed. "That you could sense Severus' spell even when he created nothing more than a single drop of water tells me your sensitivity is well above average. I wonder... dear, what did it feel like when he cast that last spell?"

"The weak one?" He asked. When Pomfrey confirmed, he said, "cold." Like slowing a waterfall down to a trickle. But still unmistakably bubbling right beside him. "Weaker than the other ones, I guess."

"Cold..?" Pomfrey mouthed to herself.

"You *guess?"* Snape's whole mien oozed annoyance.

Dazai nodded. “Each spell was about the same as the last.” He paused. “Sir.”

Snape’s eyes flew wide open.

Pomfrey, however, nodded as if she had expected such an answer.

“Magic Sensitivity is just like any other sense: too small and it can’t be felt, too much and it can be overwhelming. For most wizards, casting a spell means focusing on their magic long enough to successfully change its shape. The wand does most of the work, but there is still an unmistakable sensation of magic one feels when casting.”

“The *tingling* you mentioned before,” Dazai guessed, although magic felt like a lot more than just tingling to him. It was roiling in his guts, or screaming in his skull, or pounding at his eyes.

Pomfrey nodded. “But you aren’t *most* wizards, dear. You’re someone with a white-level sensitivity to magic. What feels like tingling to everyone else, I suspect, feels like *fire* to you.” She flipped a page in her notes. “Simply put, the reason you get sick after casting magic is because you’re overwhelmed with sensory input.”

Dazai blinked, taking in the information.

Pomfrey must have read the expression on his face as uncertainty. “It’s just a theory right now, mind you. But not an unlikely one.” She paused. “Overstimulation can happen to anyone with any sense. To sense Severus’ magic so strongly, I can only imagine how intense it must feel to cast yourself.”

“Is there any way to fix it?” Snape asked suddenly. At some point, he had pulled up a seat beside Dazai’s bed. “Or lower his sensitivity?”

The Biology of Magic had explicitly mentioned that magical sensitivity was innate and could not be altered. Snape must have already known that as well. Dazai raised a questioning brow in his direction.

As expected, Madam Pomfrey shook her head. “Not to my knowledge.” Something in her tone told Dazai that wouldn’t stop her from researching the subject further.

Dazai considered Pomfrey's theory.

It was possible she was right, but he also knew she could be completely and utterly *wrong*. Until Pomfrey knew about No Longer Human, she would always be working off of an incomplete picture. Perhaps Pomfrey was right—or half-right—or totally and completely off-base. Either way, it was clear yet again that Dazai was an anomaly. An outlier.

No Longer Human ate magic up, and yet, Dazai could spell cast. More than anything, that contradiction was what boggled Dazai's mind. Still...

A question popped into Dazai’s head suddenly.

Could everyone else not sense magic from way across the room? Was that why none of his classmates were worried about the Cornish pixies before their release—they couldn't sense the violently buzzing magic?

Dazai opened his mouth to ask, but stopped short at seeing Pomfrey and Snape's still incredulous expressions.

Snape let out a long breath. He ran a hand over his face, and that shock now looked something haggard. He met Dazai's eyes.

"I have to apologize."

...what?

Dazai blinked several times. "Apology accepted, Sir." He paused. "What did you do now?"

Snape let out an exasperated breath before turning pensive once more. "For a year now, Hogwarts has been teaching you in a way that is actively harming you. I must apologize to you on Hogwarts' behalf for that."

Dazai shifted in place. Half of what Dazai learned, he learned in pain. In the Port Mafia—with his father being who he was—that was normal. To hear Snape apologize for doing so, even accidentally...

"Ah," Dazai drew some good humor into his voice, before the lapse in his focus could become evident, "Professor Snape didn't seem the type to apologize. I guess even you have soft spots."

However, instead of rising to anger like Snape was so often prone to, the potions master sighed. He pinched the bridge of his nose, looking deeply exhausted. "It is not a matter of character," he said, certain. "Hogwarts has done you a great disservice. Any professor who would overlook the harm done to a student in their care is not fit to be a professor."

Again, all Dazai could do was to stare.

It felt like someone had poured cold water over his head. With each second Snape's earnest stare bore into him, the jarring feeling only grew. It was colder than the trickling feeling of aqua eructo and more entrancing than the mysterious pull of the Sensing Stone. Snape genuinely looked to be sorry.

It was disarming. And no small amount unnerving.

Remembering himself, Dazai folded his hands in his lap and shuttered closed whatever expression might be on his face. "I guess I'll forgive you," Dazai's tongue spoke for him, "in exchange for less homework."

"Absolutely not."

"You're no fun."

The sound of paper rustling tore Dazai and Snape from one another's focus.

Madam Pomfrey stood, skimmed through her notes, then set them down beside the Sensing Stone. "Now, now, you two."

Snape grumbled about being told off, but otherwise did little but to stand as well.

"I originally had wanted to run a few more tests, but..." Pomfrey's eyes fell to the Sensing Stone. She considered it for a second before draping the cloth back over it.

Before the Stone disappeared, Dazai caught a final glimpse of that dark something behind the clouds. A flash of black, slithering in place like the sky before a downpour.

"After this, I want to do a bit more research before moving forward," Pomfrey finished. Dazai's eyes snapped back to her. "Severus, I hope what we've learned today will be enough for you to work with for now?"

Snape nodded. "Plenty. Thank you, Poppy."

"Is class over, then?"

"For today," Snape said. He waited for Dazai to stand before saying, "for next week's lesson, we'll meet in my office."

Curious, Dazai asked, "what are we doing next time, Sir? Not looking at the Sensing Stone again, I assume."

Snape shook his head. "I'll have to do more research myself before finalizing your lesson plan. Just don't be late, Problem Child."

Dazai nodded. That made sense. He just hoped whatever lessons Snape came up with were worth his time—unlike Quirrell's redundant (and often mentally taxing) lessons a year prior.

Seeing as the lesson was now complete, Dazai dipped his head in a quick goodbye. He walked past Snape on his way to the infirmary door. He grabbed the handle but stopped before opening it.

"Go on, hun." Pomfrey said after a second passed. "Severus and I need to have a quick chat, but you should be on your way. I'm sure your friends are waiting for you."

Outside of Blaise, Dazai doubted that. Still...

He glanced back at the Sensing Stone. Its magic lapped lazily at the air. Behind the blue cloth, behind the yellow Pomfrey saw, behind even the murky white, something dark was writhing. A feeling of foreboding licked at Dazai's mind.

“It’s impossible,” Severus declared the second Dazai was gone.

Poppy sighed. She leaned back into the table. “You witnessed the same thing I did, Severus. Even when I could not sense your spellcasting, Mr. Dazai was able to instantly react. I’m sure of it: he can really see the Sensing Stone as white.”

“No one can see white.”

“And yet, here we are.” Her notes stared back up at her, detailing each and every one of Dazai’s words and reactions. What had started as an ordinary check-up had very quickly spiraled into the realm of impossible. Severe, she turned on Severus. “This level of Magical Sensitivity is unheard of, but it makes sense.”

“Begrudgingly, I have to agree.” Severus squeezed his eyes shut. "I know we discussed that he likely had high sensitivity, but this..."

Poppy frowned. Severus always started the years off stressed and tired, but this was something bigger. “Did you take the medicine I gave you for that headache?”

His hands, before rested on the table, now reached out for Poppy’s notes. He skimmed them. At the top of the paper, rather than writing out Dazai's full name, she'd instead written *Problem Child.* Severus' lips curled up briefly in amusement, though he didn't allow the humored expression to last more than a few seconds. “An hour ago. There’s no need to fuss.”

Poppy rolled her eyes. “I’ll stop fussing when you stop pushing yourself too hard. Come now, Severus. What’s the matter?”

Severus’ eyes didn’t lift from the paper. A furrow in his brow told Poppy he was deep in thought. “Take your pick.”

“Severus.”

He blew out a hot breath. “The students are just as rowdy as always, Gilderoy Lockhart exists, one of my snakes is currently defying everything the wizarding community knows about Magic Sensitivity.” He looked up from the paper, face deadpan. “Etcetera.”

Poppy smothered her laugh with both hands. *“Gilderoy Lockhart exists?”* She echoed, greatly amused.

“Unfortunately.”

“He just needs some time to adjust to life as a teacher. I’m sure he’ll settle down soon.”

Severus raised an unimpressed brow. “Did you not hear of him unleashing a horde of Cornish pixies on the student body?”

She most certainly had. Since the first day of class, Poppy had seen to at least two-dozen students for pixie-related injuries. “Give him time.”

“His ignorance is dangerous.” Severus paused. Gravely he added, “in more ways than one.”

Poppy immediately knew what Severus was referring to. The Daily Prophet article had shocked her to her core: Lockhart and young Dazai meeting in Flourish and Blotts, and everything that had transpired after. She could hardly believe a professor would threaten a student, but the Daily Prophet certainly knew how to spin a tale. It was no wonder people were so quick to lash out at Dazai after what the papers were saying about him. Poppy tutted. “Albus won’t give him a talking to?”

Severus shook his head. “You know where the headmaster’s priorities lie.”

Poppy sighed.

With a quietly cast spell, she levitated the Sensing Stone back into its box. “Well,” the box lifted into the air and floated towards her office where it found a place on the bookshelf. Her voice dropping into something lower, more serious, she said, “that’s what you have me for. Between the two of us, we’ll get to the bottom of things. You know I can’t bear the thought of a student being hurt any more than you can, Severus.”

Severus hummed, but didn’t look especially comforted. There was still a tired pinch to his brows and a drag of dark rings under his eyes. “Did you notice anything else about the boy? Injuries? Odd behavior?”

“You mean aside from what he saw in the Sensing Stone?” She asked lightly. When Severus’ severe expression didn’t shift, she sighed. She glanced to her notes, in Severus’ hands. “I didn’t see any obvious wounds—though he was wearing gloves and long sleeves, so it’s difficult to say.” The gloves had briefly caught her attention earlier. But between the Sensing Stone and their subsequent experiment, Poppy had promptly forgotten to wonder over their existence. “The gloves are new,” she said as an afterthought.

“In the papers a week ago, he had bandages on his face,” Severus pointed out.

Poppy shrugged. “If he was injured, the wounds have healed over by now. And he didn’t seem to be in any pain, aside from some tension. I thought about asking, if he didn’t look so on edge already... Although, I’m more inclined to say he was just nervous to be the focus of so much scrutiny.” She paused. “Anyone would be with how you’re glaring, Sev.”

His scowl only deepened.

“There wasn’t much I could glean from his behavior. That boy chooses his words very carefully, you know. And he tends to keep very still.”

“He fidgets,” Severus said, miming something with his hands in example. “When he’s nervous.”

She nodded, having noticed that as well. “There were a few things he said, though.” She paused, considering. “For one: he mentioned your spell felt *cold.”*

Severus raised a brow. “Am I meant to know what that means?”

Poppy shook her head. “My point exactly. It’s such an unusual way to describe magic, isn’t it? Magic feels like a light tingling on the skin only when its especially potent, and yet he thought first to call it cold.”

“Curious,” Severus said. “Does that mean something to you, as matron?”

“Not necessarily. It did catch my attention, is all.” Something to research later. If her books turned up nothing on the subject, Poppy knew she would have to send another letter to the staff at St. Mungo’s. Perhaps the unusual descriptor of 'cold' would mean something to them.

Severus consulted the notes one final time before returning them to Poppy. “Anything else?”

“Just one more thing, really.” But first... She shot him a look. The worry had been hanging over her for a while now, “I take it your investigation into Mr. Dazai for Albus isn’t going well, if you’re hounding me for answers like this.”

“You *are* the investigation at this point. Yokohama’s records are kept tighter than the vaults at Gringrott’s. If I want to do something to help him, I’m going to have to do it without Yokohama’s consent, it seems.” Severus sneered. A troublesome thought furrowed his brows. “Regardless, I think you care more about the boy’s welfare than Albus. If anyone should be consulted in this investigation, it should be the school’s matron.”

Poppy very much wished that weren’t the case. She had known Albus for quite some time now, however, and knew how the man could get. She shook the thought off, feeling privately treasonous. “I’m not sure my medical knowledge will be much help, I’m afraid. For now, the most I can be is an extra pair of eyes.”

“And? What more have you noticed?”

“It might have been nothing,” she said slowly “After all, Mr. Dazai did seem somewhat distracted.”

“He wasn’t distracted, he was scheming,” Severus retorted automatically.

Poppy rolled her eyes. “You always assume the worst.”

“What did you notice?”

She paused to collect her thoughts. Then, “It was just a little moment... but when you asked him what color the stone was, he trailed off after saying ‘white.’ For a second, I almost thought he was going to say something more.”

“You can’t possibly think he saw something else in the Sensing Stone.” Severus was not asking a question. There was no joking in his tone, as if the potion master was telling himself as much as he was Poppy. “It’s not possible.”

Poppy looked him dead in the eye. “Out of everything we just witnessed, what makes you think *impossible* is out of that boy’s reach?”

Chapter End Notes

i think someone said it was their birthday this week, so: happy birthday!

the Sensing Stone was inspired by the Spiritual Kimono from Natsume's Book of Friends (anime/manga), but also by aspects from "A Warlock's Wish" by vividpast (my very favorite fic!!)

see yall next week! thanks for reading/commenting/etc. very appreciated :)
Next up: its a gang meeting!

Hell's Hounds

Chapter Summary

It's a gang meet-up!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dazai’s weekly letter to Mori had been a little light on detail.

It wasn’t for lack of trying. After all, Dazai always tried to flesh out his mission reports to a satisfactory level. Anything less and Mori started to worry he was falling into a depressive episode. But between arriving at Hogwarts and now, he hadn’t made any headway on Lucius’ test. Discounting everything with Lockhart and the Sensing Stone, Dazai had a relatively quiet week.

Still, Dazai wrote out his letter and shipped it off on Featherbrain’s wings. Mori would just have to deal.

(Mori would *also* have to deal with Featherbrain tearing a hole in Mori's nice, new doctor's coat—Dazai's special orders for the owl just before she took off.)

With that done, Dazai now waited in one of the many halls of Hogwarts. A large, empty wall stood at his back. Sometimes, he knew a tapestry to hang there. Other times, there was a door.

The club-room.

Or—it was the *gang office* now.

He couldn't get in.

In the past, Dazai and the Loyalty Club would meet here for lessons. But whatever magic made the room appear didn’t agree with Dazai. He would have to wait for someone else to come along before the empty wall split open into a door. It was a hassle, but Dazai was honestly just pleased to have found his way there by himself for once.

Dazai stood perfectly still, only looking up intermittently when someone passed by. He didn’t recognize anyone’s face, but they all seemed to recognize him. It put a pit in Dazai’s stomach.

There had to be some way to mollify the masses. A way to ingratiate himself to them, somehow. At the very least, then Dazai could walk around the school without garnering so much attention. But between Lockhart and the Daily Prophet, Dazai had a lot of bad press to work against. He considered, briefly, explaining the truth about Quirrell to the other students,

but eventually decided against it. At this point, he doubted bringing up Voldemort by name would do much in his favor.

But there had to be something. The twins would probably have a good idea.

Deep in thought, Dazai didn't notice someone walking right up to him without any hint of hesitation.

"Why are you standing by this wall all alone?"

Dazai snapped back to attention, shoulders tensing defensively on instinct.

The person standing in front of him was quite a bit shorter than him. She had long, pale hair with eyes silver and piercing. The blue of her tie told Dazai she was Ravenclaw. Something about her expression gave Dazai the impression that she was seeing straight through him.

"I'm contemplating bashing my head against the wall," Dazai told her for lack of a better answer. He could hardly tell this random girl he was waiting to enter his gang's office.

"Is there something interesting on the other end?" She asked, evidently ignoring Dazai's remark entirely. "I read in the Quibbler article *'10 Things You Didn't Know About Hogwarts'* that the school is full of secret rooms and passageways. It was number seven."

He looked at the girl, then to the other students in the hall. Nothing had changed: everyone was still keeping a fearful distance from him. Yet, this girl had boldly walked up to him and started a conversation.

"What are you doing?" He asked instead.

"Asking a question," she said in a voice that seemed to be flowing like sand. It fell through the air and slipped between her fingers shapelessly.

Dazai raised a brow. Was this girl totally right in the head? Her eyes were intense, but didn't seem to be focused on anything at all. "I mean," Dazai titled his chin towards where a gaggle of first-years were staring at them, horrified, "what are you doing talking to *me?* Your friends think I'm going to attack you."

"Are you?"

"I hadn't been planning on it," Dazai replied, a little dumbfounded. Either this girl had no idea who he was, or she was dead-set on alienating herself.

"Those aren't my friends, anyway. They're always calling me 'Loony' Lovegood, since they think I'm a bit odd." She paused. "My name is Luna Lovegood. Did I mention? It's Luna Lovegood, not 'Loony' Lovegood," she emphasized. "Only Ginny Weasley doesn't call me that. But she's wandered off to somewhere again. I was just checking the Gryffindor common room, but she wasn't there. Do you think she's picked up a Wrackspurt infestation?"

Dazai had no idea what a Wrackspurt was.

"Oh, have you got them, too? Earlier there was a look on your face like you weren't entirely here. Thinking happy thoughts will dispel the Wrackspurts. That's what the Quibbler says in Issue 76, fourth article, third paragraph—"

"Do I know you?" Dazai cut in abruptly.

Luna blinked. "No. Although I've read all about you."

"Everyone has read about me."

"Yes, but everyone is reading the Daily Prophet. That Pansy Parkinson, especially. Did you know she stopped by the Ravenclaw common rooms the other day just to talk bad about you? It was quite worrying stuff. Perhaps you should try to make nice with her before she insights a rebellion." She paused. "I tried convincing my housemates to read the Quibbler for information on you instead. If you want a reliable article, then you need to be reading the Quibbler. I've been subscribed for years now."

Dazai perked up, interest at once peaked. He'd never heard of the Quibbler before Luna popped up and started name-dropping it left-and-right. But if it was reporting different events than the Daily Prophet... "If the Quibbler is so reliable, why have I never heard of it?" He asked, already wondering how he could get his hands on a copy.

Something imperceptible in Luna's expression hardened. "Just because something isn't popular, doesn't mean it isn't true."

Just as quick as the emotion came on, that strangely stern expression on Luna's face vanished. It was replaced once again by a dreamy, almost serene look. Dazai mentally clocked the reaction, wondering what history lied behind those words. "If anyone knows that," he said, words carefully chosen, "it's me."

"Hmm. I suppose that's true."

"But the Quibbler tells the truth, *huh?"* Dazai scratched his chin, feigning thoughtfulness. "What does it have to say about me?"

"Well," she brought a finger to her lips in thought, "for one, I don't believe you really are a demon. If you were, then I'd be able to see your horns." She got up on her tippy-toes to peer overtop his head. "I don't see any... and your hair is quite short. Did you get a snip recently?"

"Luna," he chided. This girl sure could ramble.

"According to the Quibbler, Mr. Quirrell went on sabbatical and came back possessed by an Albanian spirit. You aren't a demon—you're an *exorcist."* She hummed, ignoring the way Dazai's brow rose higher and higher the more she spoke. "The Ravenclaw house ghost told me that all the ghosts avoid you, so it must be true. Even Peeves avoids you. Just yesterday, he spilled tomato soup all over my robes... if I were an exorcist, too, I wouldn't have had to scrub them so thoroughly. Ginny helped me though, so it's all right. Only, she doesn't read the Quibbler and says you aren't any sort of exorcist."

An... exorcist?

...well, it was better than demon.

Maybe Dazai had it right in the first place, and Luna Lovegood wasn't the most grounded person in the world. But there was something that held him in place. For the first time since starting his second year, a stranger wasn't looking at him with fear or trepidation. Instead, Luna looked at him with eyes that didn't seem to being seeing at all. As if she was talking to just some other nobody in the halls.

It was refreshing.

And a little interesting, if Dazai was being fair. It was enough to keep him from just walking away without another word, at least.

More than that, however, was this Quibbler paper. Hearing Luna now only confirmed it for Dazai: The controversy of his fight with Quirrell stemmed with the Daily Prophet alone. Whatever was going on behind the scenes, it started there.

"Do you have any copies of the Quibbler?" Dazai asked suddenly.

Luna immediately perked up, an excited smile lighting her face. "I have every copy. My dad is the editor for the Quibbler. I'm sure he'll be very pleased to learn he has a new reader."

Her dad! Well, that explained Luna's enthusiasm over the topic. Although Dazai couldn't even imagine himself being a fan of his own father's work. Or Mori's, at that. Though Port Mafia work tended to be bloody, unlike the rather plain world of tabloid journalism. Perhaps *that* was the real difference, here.

"Could I have a copy? Any one of the articles about me."

She smiled. "Of course!"

Perhaps something in the Quibbler could give Dazai an idea of what was going on. Somewhere, between Quirrell and Rita Skeeter, the story had gotten entirely out of hand. Even if this Quibbler seemed to mostly be nonsense, it was still closer to the truth than the Daily Prophet.

"Oh? Who is this?"

"A friend or a foe?"

Dazai and Luna both looked up, coming face-to-face with the impish grins of the Weasley twins.

Dazai cast a quick glance to Luna. "Friend," he said after a second. Beside him, Luna's expression fell into stark surprise. She obviously hadn't expected to be called 'friend' so casually. If anything about that 'Loony' story was to be believed, he doubted she had many friends to begin with. "This is Luna. We just met and she doesn't think I'm a serial killer. Isn't that exciting?"

“I’m friends with an exorcist,” Luna hummed, surprise giving way to a bubbly sort of smile. “How lovely!”

Fred and George smirked, laughter on their lips. “You’re an exorcist now, Snakey?”

Dazai wiggled his fingers at them. They snorted.

“The Weasley twins,” Luna said suddenly, drawing everyone’s attention back to her. Bluntly, she said, “I’ve seen you around. Ginny says awful things about you.”

George laughed. *“Oh?* What’s our little sis telling everyone about us?”

“That you’re pranksters with a mean streak. She says you take things too far, sometimes. And that you’re maybe planning some kind of mutiny against the professors.” She hummed. “Is it true that you told Ginny she’d have to live in the woods if she missed the boats?”

“Just a little prank.”

“Harmless fun!”

“Is it?”

Once again, that strangely serious look crossed her face. And just like last time, it was gone within a fraction of a second. Luna didn’t pay the twins’ perplexed expressions any mind. Instead, she asked out of the blue, “are you three planning a prank like that right now?”

Fred and George blinked. *“Er...* no?”

Dazai met Luna’s eyes, shrugging. It could be a problem if Luna spilled the beans about his gang’s secret meeting spot. Thinking this, he offered her a small smile.

The prying curiosity in Luna’s eyes immediately shifted, replaced instead by something warm and friendly.

“No need to worry. I won’t tell anyone that the three of you are up to some mysterious mischief behind this wall.” Luna’s smile was pleasantly empty. She turned to Dazai, “I’m sure my dad would love to interview you for one of his articles. Let me know if you’d be interested.”

Then, without even a word of goodbye, Luna turned on her heel and left.

Dazai and the twins watched her go, befuddled.

“Er... she seemed nice?”

“A little strange,” Fred said with a puff. “You told her about the secret room here, Boss?”

Dazai shook his head. “She was just guessing, actually. Evidently, it’s common knowledge in the Quibbler.”

"The Quibbler?" The twins sounded surprised. "You read that nonsense?"

"Luna's father *writes* it," he corrected, then shrugged his shoulders. Then, pivoting, he asked, "did you happen to notice if Ron and Hermione were on their way here?"

"Think they're around here somewhere," George said, glancing around.

Dazai also took a moment to scan the hallway. At some point, that group of first-years seemed to have left. Evidently, the only thing holding their attention had been the possibility of him attacking Luna. Now, it was only Dazai and the Weasley twins.

He turned away from the empty hall. "Well, they can catch up later. How does this thing open, again?" Dazai rapped a knuckle over the brick wall. Magic hummed beneath his glove, but it was unwilling to budge for Dazai.

"No luck, Boss?" Fred snorted.

"You just have to, like," George narrowed his eyes at the wall and waved his arms around, as if feigning an elaborate spell, "want it really hard."

"At least, that's what Blaise said when he showed us last year."
Despite the blasé nature of George's instruction, Dazai watched as, after a second, the bricks shifted. They slowly morphed into a familiar stone door. The twins gave the hallway a final, cursory glance before swinging the door open. They helped themselves inside. Dazai followed a step behind, kicking the door closed with his heel as he did so.

The club room looked almost exactly like Dazai remembered it. Stone floors lined the entire, massive room and a colorful, stain glass window lit up the back wall. The mahogany desk and sofa were also exactly where he remembered them to be. A cozy looking blanket was draped over the couch.

Also familiar was the sting of magic on his skin upon entering. The entire room seemed to be made of magic. Naturally, No Longer Human needed to make its upset of this known.

However, there seemed to be a few new additions to the room as well. A new lamp by the desk cast a golden glow over the whole space, illuminating the room with flickering firelight. There was an odd iron smell in the room. Dazai's nose scrunched up as he searched around for the source. A dozen potted plants lined the walls. A few other new things had filled out the room as well: a chalk board, an empty bookcase, a mountainous nest of pillows and blankets—

Dazai abruptly stopped his exploration of the room.

A nest?

A furrow in his brow, Dazai sneaked across the room towards the pillows.

"Well, this is new," Fred commented from somewhere behind him. "I don't remember wanting a fancy lamp light this."

Dazai took another step closer to the pillows. It was hard to focus on with the magic swarming everywhere in the room, but Dazai thought he could almost make out a distinct magical signature hiding within the nest. It felt warm. Faintly smoky in his lungs.

“Or this...” George paused, *“uh,* pile of suspicious raw meats.”

A fire lamp, a nest, and raw meat. A magical signature like ember and ash.

Oh. Dazai knew what this was!

Just as soon as the realization set in, however, so too did tension snap his entire body ram-rod straight. They weren’t alone in the club room.

An old enemy of Dazai’s was hiding amongst them.

A scaly, black head poked out from the nest of pillows.

She was a lot bigger now—head alone the size of a watermelon—but Dazai recognized the creature immediately.

“Egg isn’t still feral, is she?” He asked aloud.

Tentatively, Dazai took a step back, accidentally bumping into one of the twins. Fred glanced down at him. Following Dazai’s gaze, Fred’s joking smile immediately flickered out.

The Norwegian Ridgeback dragon slowly rose from out of its nest, blankets slipping from its form and falling into a pile on the floor. Its body rose, and rose, and rose. Dazai’s eyes widened as he took in the sheer size of Egg now—she must have at least quadrupled in size since he’d last seen her. Egg’s claws *clacked* against the stone floor. Her wings stretched out, twitching and pulling the thin, dark skin out unnaturally. Fire-orange eyes blinked one at a time. The dragon took a step toward them. Dazai felt his breath catch in his throat as a low growl slipped from Egg’s snarling maw.

Going stiff, Fred grabbed Dazai’s shoulders and pulled him away. *“Uh,”* Fred whispered, “I’m going to guess ‘still feral.’”

Dazai’s fingers twitched at his side, No Longer Human poised to defend.

Egg took another menacing step, wings outstretched and large—

“Are you harassing my dragon?”

Like flipping a switch, all the tension in the room vanished.

Egg made a strangely cooing noise before plopping down on her hindquarters. Her wings pulled back into her sides and her claws tucked under her stomach. Dazai hesitated for a second longer before whirling on whoever had spoken.

Draco raised an unamused brow.

“Good afternoon, Draco,” Dazai called, “this dragon is trying to kill us.”

“She’s just saying hello. Aren’t you, Egg?”

Dazai blinked. He gave the room another quick once over only once he was sure Egg was staying put. “And you’ve just been... keeping her in the club room?”

“Where else am I meant to keep your illegal pet, Dazai? She’s *illegal.”*

“Ah...” Dazai rubbed the back of his neck. “You said ‘illegal’ twice.”

Draco shot him a glare. Then, he walked straight past Dazai and the twins to give Egg a gentle pat on the snout. Dazai watched with wide eyes as the dragon stayed perfectly still. She didn’t prepare to attack or growl threateningly. Instead, she made a pleased-sounding squeak and butted her head into Draco’s leg.

“You tamed her!” George piped up, interest sparkling in his eyes. “Impressive!”

“You did tame her, right?” Dazai asked before Draco could respond. “I’d rather not have to fend off a dragon for a second time. She's definitely old enough to be breathing fire now, too. And burning to death is *not* on my list of *best ways to commit suicide.”*

"Your *what?!"* Fred and George whirled on him.

Draco gave Egg a hearty scratch on the chin. She practically melted into the touch.

“She looks tame to me,” Blaise said from the doorway.

He walked up to Dazai’s side, giving his friend a quick once-over. “At the very least, she’s a far cry from when she first hatched.”

She was also *bigger*, which didn’t do much for her looking non-threatening. But Blaise was right. When Egg first hatched, she was a little spitfire of a thing, all claws and fangs. Blaise had been hurt, then. Blood on his cloak—

Dazai pushed that memory aside. “How did you tame her?” He asked. All his research on the subject said that Norwegian Ridgebacks, females especially, were violent beasts.

Draco finally looked up from Egg, hands falling to his sides. “Even wild animals respect the Malfoy name, Dazai.” At the row of blank expressions staring back at him, he added, “My father keeps all sorts of ancient books in the library. After I came home with a dragon last year, he gave me a book on them.”

“Did someone say ‘book?’”

Dazai turned upon recognizing Hermione’s voice. He waved first to her, then to Ron once he noticed the red-head at her back.

Draco’s lip pulled downward. For a second, Dazai thought he might snap at the Gryffindors. But after a moment, all he said was, “Written by *the* Merlin. The Great Wizard Merlin was a

Dragonlord, so of course he would know how to tame a dragon."

"The Malfoy charm helped as well, I'm sure," Blaise commented idly. His eyes fell briefly to Egg, who had since returned to her nest.

"Naturally."

With that settled, Dazai finally crossed the room to the desk. He dragged his fingers through a thin layer of dust.

Everyone was finally gathered all together. Fred and George, Draco, Blaise, Hermione, and Ron: Dazai's own little Hogwarts gang. With the addition of Egg, they even had a sort of mascot. Something about seeing them all together like this bloomed warm pride in Dazai's chest. Not only had these people come to trust him, but Dazai felt that he could really trust them in return.

Dazai ignored the reflexive voice in his head sounding like Mori's, *"You're too fond of them, Shuuji."*

Mostly. He could *mostly* trust them.

He clapped. The noise startled away Dazai's unwanted thoughts and drew the gang's eyes straight to him. "Thanks, everyone, for coming when called."

"Why is he talking about us like we're his dogs again?" Ron stage-whispered to Hermione.

She shook her head.

"Last year we all did fantastic work of stealing the Philosopher's Stone." Dazai looked from one person to the next as he spoke. Fred and George were smiling, still clearly pleased with how the heist had gone. Hermione and Ron shared a brief, exasperated glance. It wasn't lacking in fondness, Dazai noted warmly. True to character, Blaise merely nodded in passive agreement. Only Draco wore a serious expression on his face—but given everything between the Port Mafia and the Malfoys, that made sense.

Moving on, Dazai continued to address the group, "I want to do something big this year, too. Something less likely to end in the magical community demonizing me, if possible. I liked the idea of stealing test answer keys." He glanced to the twins, noting how they eagerly bounced on their feet. "But I'm open to suggestions."

"That's *cheating,"* Hermione cut in immediately.

"It's business," Dazai corrected with a cheeky grin, "as long as we charge for it."

Hermione squeaked. "That's still cheating!"

"Wait, we're making money on this?" Ron perked up.

Dazai shrugged. "It's more exciting like that."

“Boring,” Draco drawled. He crossed his arms. “*Some* of us don’t need to pawn off test answers to make do. If you need money, Dazai, I’m sure my father can loan you some.”

As one, the Weaselys went stiff and glared down Draco. Dazai understood why: the Weasley family didn’t have much in the way of expendable money. They wore hand-me-down clothes and shared books between them. Whereas Dazai and Draco seemingly had unlimited financial backing, Ron and the twins didn’t have such a luxury. It was clearly a spot of contention between them. Dazai frowned.

“No fighting."

He blinked, suddenly realizing—

Looking around now, it became very clear to Dazai how his gang was arranged: the Gryffindors on one side and the Slytherins on the other. The only outlier was Dazai himself, standing smack-dab in the middle. Upon noticing the distance, Dazai sighed, “Don’t tell me you six have just been bickering with each other the entire time I was away.”

“We’re not *fighting*, per se,” the twins said. The anger in their eyes vanished the second they turned to Dazai. They sounded hesitant. Apologetic. “And we haven’t *been* fighting this whole time. It’s more...”

Dazai raised a brow. “What?”

The gang shared guilty looks, save for Draco, who stuck his chin in the air and avoided everyone’s eyes.

Hermione patted down her robes. “To be honest, the gang didn’t meet up at all after you left last year, Dazai.”

Ron nodded, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

“Yeah,” Fred agreed. “I mean, Blaise showed us to this room, but then we all kind of stopped talking to each other.”

“You’re the glue holding us all together, Boss!”

Dazai blinked, taking in everyone’s appearances again. Draco and Blaise off to one side, Ron, Hermione, and the twins off to the other. Upon entering, no one had spoken to anyone outside of their house, barring a few sparse words from Draco to Hermione. They barely looked at one another. Even in Diagon Alley, Draco and the twins hadn’t interacted like friends might. The gang was falling apart before it was even built together.

(Dazai had told Mori his gang was strong—that his gang was a resource. Apparently, it had been a lie.)

Dazai had been born into the mafia under the current boss. By extension, he was born to lead. If he couldn’t get this group of idiots to work together, then he wasn’t fit to be alive.

Something tangled in his chest.

“That won’t do,” Dazai said, propping his hands on his hips. “How are we meant to do anything nefarious if none of you will even look at each other?”

“N-nefarious?” Hermione stumbled.

“Before we move on to anything exciting, we need...” he hummed in thought. *“Oh,”* Dazai blinked. “We need team-building exercises.”

In the mafia, people just got along. If you couldn’t put up and work as a team, one or all of you would die. Dazai was forgetting again that people at Hogwarts were soft. House loyalty was as divisive as things got around here. Discounting Quirrell, mortal peril never really factored in.

Fred and George immediately burst out laughing. Meanwhile, Draco’s disapproving condescension had dropped into shock.

“You can’t be serious,” Draco spat. “I’m not working with blood-traitors and a mudblood. I’m here because of you and Blaise.”

Dazai’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t comment except to raise a brow. “Last year,” he said, stepping closer to Draco. They locked eyes. “You had me do a show of loyalty. It’s kind of the same thing, isn’t it? Only now it’s a show of comradery.”

“Dazai,” Draco huffed, “that’s not at all the same situation, and you know it.”

He shrugged.

Blaise cleared his throat. “What did you have in mind, Boss?”

“Ah, I hadn’t thought about it,” Dazai kicked the ground. Unconsciously, his eyes slipped back to Egg. The dragon yawned before curling up in a heap. He hummed. “How about this? Draco can teach Ron how to care for Egg. Then you can take turns caring for her throughout the year. That would be a good start.”

“What?!”

“Absolutely not!”

Dazai waved them off. “Don’t yell—it's giving me a headache.”

Ron shook his head, wide-eyed. “That snake'll have Eggy corrupted against me! I’ll be dragon food by the end of the week—no way am I going anywhere near Draco!”

“As if I would let you taint Egg with your soiled blood-traitor hands.”

Clicking his tongue, Dazai mentally rolled his eyes. These two hadn’t changed at all. The only time Dazai had ever seen Draco and Ron get along had been last year in the owlery.

“Draco wouldn’t have you killed unless I asked him to.” He smiled pleasantly.

Draco didn't comment.

Ron squawked.

"Draco, it's more practical to share responsibly over Egg's care. *I* can't do it," he waved a gloved hand around in point, "and I technically told Ron he could keep her." He beamed, giving them a saccharine, "Try not to kill each other, okay?"

"I—"

"Dazai—!"

"If you all behave, then I can finally give out my joining gifts." Dazai drew a whine into his voice. "But you're all so disobedient, it's like we're barely even a gang anymore."

Fred and George immediately snapped upright. They shared a frantic look.

"Boss isn't going to give us our gifts?!"

"Quick, Ronnikins! Give your good pal Draco a hug!"

The twins unceremoniously grabbed Ron's shoulders and pushed him towards Draco. Ron squirmed and kicked in their hold. "He is *not* my friend!"

"For us? Please?"

"For the joining gift, Ronnie!" Fred pleaded. "Don't you want a gift from Dazai?"

Ron finally weaseled out of their grasps. He sounded out of breath, but thoughtfulness had taken over the prior disgust. He shot an almost too-quick-to-catch look in Draco's direction. "I guess..." he grumbled.

"Well, *I* already have my joining gift from Blaise," Draco puffed up. In example, he lifted up the skirt of his robes. Wrapped around his leg was an elaborate-looking wand holster. It looked to be made of high-quality black leather. A silver dragon was embroidered on the side. Draco dropped his robes after giving the room only a second to admire its craftsmanship. "But I suppose, if you beg me for it, I'll teach you about dragons."

Dazai watched as Ron held an inner war with himself. The twins, too, seemed to be eagerly awaiting Ron's response.

Surprisingly, it was Hermione who put an end to things.

"Oh, that's enough, you two!" She shook her head, curls bouncing. "Quit bickering already. In the time it takes for you two to stop arguing, I could read Merlin's dragon book ten-times over!"

Dazai beamed. "Great! Hermione will learn how to take care of Egg too, then."

"Huh?" She jumped. "I-I wasn't volunteering, Dazai."

“But you’d make such a good chaperone!” He grinned. “Reading and reminding people to behave... It sounds like something you’d enjoy.”

“Well...” she trailed off, unable to really disagree.

“Wait, what about those two?” Ron asked, shoving his thumb out in the direction of the twins. “And Blaise? What are you forcing them to do?”

“Hm? Well, they’re actually very well behaved already—”

“Stop talking about us like we’re dogs you haven’t trained yet.”

Dazai cleared his throat, pivoting quickly to another topic. “They’ll be helping the gang out with some other stuff! You kids can work on this dragon thing until you’ve learned to behave yourselves. After that you can join us with the big-time schemes.”

Fred choked on a laugh. George, helpfully, smacked him on the back.

“You’re the same age as us,” Draco intoned.

“In the meantime,” Dazai said, turning to the twins rather than gracing Draco with a response. He sifted around his robes for a second. “Something for you two.”

Fred and George bounced excitedly in place. They shared matching grins and held out their hands expectantly.

“Ooh!”

“What’ll it be?”

Dazai dropped a small, metal object into each of their waiting palms.

The twins *oohed.*

Fred held his up to see it better. A small, red gem caught the light. “A cuff-link?” He asked, surprise in his voice.

“Yeah, but these look *really* expensive!” George quickly looked from his gift to Fred’s.

The cuff-links were, in fact, excessively expensive—not that Dazai’s wallet was any lighter for it. Back in Yokohama, Mori was probably mourning the loss of his fanciest cuff-links, an unknowing benefactor to Dazai’s gang. Each cuff-link was about one inch wide and was made of a clean-looking metal. In the center of each cuff-link, an authentic, red ruby was affixed. A quick glance earlier in the school year told Dazai that they were pigeon bloods.

"Very expensive. You could buy a house with them,” he said. Then, Dazai explained with a wink, “they’re a set, so don’t separate them.”

For a second, he thought Fred and George might have short-circuited. But after a second, the Weasley twins rushed to pin the cuff-links in place. On George’s right sleeve and Fred’s left,

a shiny new joining gift reflected firelight.

They gave each other a once-over.

“My dear Fred, your cuff-link looks stunning. Wherever did you buy it?”

“Oh, this little thing?” Fred waved his arm out. “At the fancy store for rich snobs. I have an in with the boss.”

At once, they dissolved into laughter. Though Dazai noted with some amusement that their wild gesticulations had died down some. Instead, both Fred and George seemed to be trying to move very carefully, lest a cuff-link come loose.

Annoyance flickered across Draco’s face as he eyed their mocking hysterics. “Socialites don’t talk like that.”

“’Socialites,’” the twins echoed. They only laughed harder.

Rolling his eyes, Dazai tried not to let the fondness show too obviously on his face. The twins were still laughing, only pausing briefly to admire their gifts. Dazai decided they could have a moment to themselves. He looked at the others.

“Aren’t you jealous?” He hummed. “Hurry up and become friends so I can bequeath expensive gifts onto you.”

Ron glanced to Draco with an expression like he might be sick. But instead of spitting out something unkind again, he sucked in a huge breath. "Fine.”

“Fine?”

Ron nodded. “But only for the gift. I wouldn’t hang out with a *Malfoy* if it weren’t for the gift —and Egg, since she’s actually *my* dragon.”

Draco’s head snapped to face the red-head. “*Your* dragon?!”

“Dazai gave her to *me* first—”

“And when you couldn’t take care of her, Dazai gave her to *me*—”

“Okay, that’s going well,” Dazai commented with a hum. “Good luck to you all, but mostly Hermione for having to put up with everything.”

Hermione let out a world-weary sigh.

“Speaking of,” he said to her, “there’s some research I need to do. You’re welcome to tag along once these two don’t need supervision any longer.”

She perked up. “I can help now. You know I can always make time for research.”

Dazai shook his head, turning away when her frown looked hurt. “One thing at a time. It’s nothing time sensitive—I think.”

Hermione was obviously very curious, if her wide, asking eyes were anything to go by. But Dazai didn’t relent. His gang was of no use to him if it could barely function as a unit. It was more important to get that sorted out first. Moreover...

Ron and Draco kept shooting one another scathing glares.

Dazai picked at the skin of his wrist.

In the meantime, he needed to give them something to focus on. In the mafia, one of the main things (aside from the threat of death) that limited infighting was the fact that everyone shared a common goal. Things were shakier now with Father so ill but...

No. Dazai wouldn’t make the same brainless mistakes as that man.

“So,” he turned to Fred and George, “did you two already have any plans in mind for this test-answer-stealing scam?”

They perked up immediately.

A shared goal. He could give them that.

The gang continued to chat for nearly an hour after that. Dazai and the twins plotted out potential heist ideas: which professors to target, what distractions would work best, how they would attract customers. After a while, the others jumped in to offer up ideas as well.

At one point, Ron piped up, “let’s charge a galleon from each student we sell to.”

Draco promptly argued, “only a galleon? It would be more economic to charge something like... *hmm*... a sickle per question.”

All things considered, it was a surprisingly tame exchange between the two. Dazai’s gang was coming together already!

“We’d make a killing on longer tests,” Dazai hummed. “That’s a good idea. Golden star to Draco!”

“Don’t patronize me.”

Talking it out like this helped not only to bring everyone in the gang closer together, it also fleshed the scheme out a lot. By the end of the hour, everyone in the group had an objective to be working towards:

Draco and Ron would be learning to not scream at each other, with Hermione supervising.

The twins would be preparing for a heist.

Blaise would be sniffing out viable customers.

And lastly...

“Wait, what are *you* doing in this whole operation?” Ron had a brow raised and an expression somehow both amused and annoyed on his face.

“I’m delegating,” Dazai leaned away from the blackboard, where he'd been writing out everyone's assignments like he were a teacher, and the others his students. “I’m keeping everyone on track, preparing for every inevitable detour, and taking the fall if we get caught. Basically, I’m keeping the trouble to a minimum, and cleaning up whatever messes you kids get into.”

Hermione paled at the threat of trouble.

“You, of all people, don’t need any more bad press,” Blaise said.

Dazai waved him off. “I’m a demon, remember? The staff will probably blame me even if Ron were holding up a giant, flashing sign that says, ‘I did it.’”

“Why me?!”

“Anyway,” Dazai said, “I don’t mind. In a way, it makes things easier.”

Blaise gave him an unimpressed look.

With that settled, Dazai opened his mouth to dismiss the gang. Before he could, however, the twins suddenly asked, “Hey, if Dazai is a demon, what does that make us?”

Everyone’s eyes turned to the twins.

They wore looks of deep concentration between their brows. Dazai noticed immediately how they seemed to be mouthing the word ‘demon’ silently to themselves, as though testing it out.

Dazai paused. “What?”

Draco crossed his arms. “What are you two talking about now?”

Fred hesitated for only a second, eyes flashing to the Malfoy quickly. Then, he grinned. “Good question, Mister Dragon Tamer!”

“We were only thinking,” George continued, “if our boss is a demon—at least according to everyone who reads the Daily Prophet—”

“—does that make us all demons, too? Or are we more like his demonic underlings?”

Dazai grimaced. He had enough trouble with the title ‘demon’ as it was. Surely, everyone else here didn’t want to carry that weight around as well?

“We aren’t Dazai’s *underlings*,” Ron huffed, “You know what he really thinks of us? We’re his *dogs*.”

Blaise hummed. He brought a considering hand to stroke his chin. “*Ah*... were you two trying to come up with a name for the gang?”

They nodded emphatically. Dazai himself perked up a little at the idea. He hadn’t really considered naming his gang, instead seeing it as something they would tackle down the line. But now that they were working towards more concrete objectives, maybe it *was* time to start —for a lack of a better word—branding.

The twins bounced excitedly.

“Dazai’s Demons!”

“Dazai’s Dogs!”

“Stop bringing my name into it,” Dazai immediately shot them down. “If you go around saying my name like that, it’ll only be a few *hours* before we get caught.”

The twins paused, briefly looked to one another, before smashing their two suggestions into one, “Demon Dogs!”

The name hung in the air for a second, nearly—but not quite—taking root in Dazai’s head. It was certainly a menacing name for a gang. Something that inspired fear and obedience. The word '*demon'* still struck him, though.

A moment longer passed, then:

“Hell Hounds,” Dazai said. “We’ll be the Hell Hounds."

He wrote it in bold, chalk letters across the top of the blackboard.

Hell Hounds

Then, he paused. "Well, *you’re* the Hell Hounds. I’m just...”

“Hell,” Ron supplied unhelpfully.

Instead of pulling a face, like Ron probably expected, Dazai beamed. “You’re right! It’s more like ‘Hell’s Hounds’ then, isn’t it? With an apostrophe.”

In the small space between the word *Hell* and *Hounds*, Dazai drew in a tiny *'s*. He had to write it crooked to make it fit.

Hell's Hounds, it read proudly.

“Hell’s Hounds gang...” Hermione tasted the name on her tongue. “It’s a bit dark, though?”

“It has a nice ring to it,” the twins cheered, *“Hell’s Hounds!”*

Hell’s Hounds... Dazai could agree it had a certain charm to it. A little threatening, a little rebellious. Just the right name for a mafioso’s gang of schoolchildren.

“If there are no complaints—” here, Dazai paused. No one made any word of argument. “—then it’s settled. Welcome to Hell’s Hounds, everyone.”

Fred and George *whooped!* Hermione and Ron clearly looked hesitant, but Dazai saw them give one another quiet, private smiles. Even Blaise managed to pull a grin into his usually dull expression. And Draco—

Dazai’s smile stilled.

Draco was still standing alone—his own lonely little portion of the gang’s office. But unlike the others, he was not smiling. Instead, Dazai realized, his body was lined with tension. He was good at masking emotions behind a glaring mask, but Dazai could read through it. Draco looked to be deep in thought. Based on the line of his shoulders, it wasn’t a good one.

It was time the two of them had a talk.

-

If anyone at Hogwarts were to ask, Draco did not take commands.

He was a Malfoy—kin of the strongest wizarding family in history, inheritor of countless wealths, and son of the ever-cunning Lucius Malfoy. Draco commanded others. If he said, “do my homework,” commonfolk begged at his feet to do it. When he said, “leave the common room,” so he could have a private chat with someone, they booked it out of there at double-speed.

At Hogwarts, he was head of the pack, king of the crowd, and ruler of everything else.

At home, Draco tried to stay as unobtrusive as possible.

It wasn’t that his home life was *bad*, per se. He got everything he asked for and was free to speak his mind. If Draco wanted something known, he needed little more than to say it. But there were rules to navigating life in the Malfoy manor that those peons at Hogwarts just didn’t understand.

Most importantly: Lucius Malfoy was a busy, busy man.

The stresses of whatever business he was up to weighed on him a thousand times over. And that stress had only multiplied since Draco’s father first received a certain phone call, one year ago.

The Port Mafia.

Every time Draco asked, “what’s going on” or “how can I help,” he was met with nothing more than a sharp look. The words, “go back to your room. This doesn’t concern you,” were all too familiar now.

But a Malfoy didn't give up, and they didn't back down. The second Draco entered Hogwarts, he investigated anyway. He had hunted down his only lead (a student by the name of Dazai Osamu) and hung around the boy all year long. His father would appreciate the effort, Draco was sure. *He was sure...*

Then there was the Philosopher's Stone which Draco had given back to Dazai without even consulting his father.

And *then* there was Dazai, whom Draco had pledged loyalty to with only a second thought to the Malfoy name.

...He was sure he couldn't tell his father any of this!

Draco was trying not to feel too guilty about it. But silently stewing over the Port Mafia's ambassador over the last two weeks only made Draco more desperate.

Deep in thought, Draco was only distantly aware of the gang's office clearing out. Dazai dismissed the others to dinner, saying a friendly 'see-you-later' to Blaise in particular. Draco had to jumpstart himself to follow them out, brain still buzzing with worrisome thoughts.

Loyal to Dazai, loyal to his father. Draco was sure it wasn't supposed to be both. They weren't really in *business* yet. They were *competing*.

Before he made it to the door, however, a voice stopped him short.

"Draco, a word?"

Dazai was staring at him, smile pleasant in the way a Slytherin could smile when they wanted something from you. Draco matched the smile reflexively.

If I'm seen enjoying your company, Draco's mind silently tightened the bind around his throat, *I'll be dragging my father's name through the mud.*

"Sure," Draco said. He watched as Blaise gave them a final glance before shutting the door. Alone with just Draco and Dazai, the gang room suddenly felt very cold.

A Slytherin thrived in the cold depths of dungeons.

(Unless you were Dazai, Draco thought fondly, *then you were constantly whining about the temperature.)*

"Since you're so insistent on avoiding me, it's awfully difficult to get you alone," Dazai said, leaning back against the desk. His fingers rapped along the wood, the thoughtful movement looking intentional. "To think, *you* were the one who wanted to talk with me."

Draco recalled their conversation in Flourish and Blotts. A thousand questions were still buzzing in his skull just thinking about it. *What is the Port Mafia? How are you involved in something like that? What do you want with my family?* "You know why I can't have you hanging over my shoulders right now, Dazai," he said instead.

The mafioso shrugged, amused smile flitting across his face. “Bad press,” he inferred, fingers tapping out a beat.

Bad press for Dazai would mean bad press for Draco would mean bad press for the Malfoy family. Would mean—

Draco couldn’t do that to his father.

Had been told, under no uncertain terms, *not* to do that to his father.

Dazai seemed to understand. Being in the mafia, maybe he did. “Well, we’re alone now. Whatever questions you have, ask them,” he said, to the point.

“Should you be this loose with information?” Draco asked, thinking of his father’s own tight lips. He didn’t give Dazai a chance to think it over, though. He didn’t think he could handle it if Dazai changed his mind and kept the truth to himself. Bursting franticly from Draco’s lips came a thought that had been bothering him for weeks now: “You... you’re in the *mafia!?”*

“Ah,” Dazai chuckled, “there it is. Yes, I’m in the Port Mafia.”

“That’s absurd. You realize that’s absurd, right? You’re twelve.”

“So are you,” Dazai’s ring finger tapped once, twice, thrice before stilling completely. His hands fell to his sides. “I have the mafia, you have Lucius.”

Draco frowned. “That’s not the same thing at all.”

Dazai lifted a brow, but didn’t comment. Draco felt his heart murmur.

“What does the Port Mafia want from my father?” He asked, starting with the most important question. “What do *you* want with my father?”

“I didn’t lie, in Diagon Alley.” Dazai’s brow fell, rendering his expression one of boredom. “Lucius is powerful and wealthy. He’s a good connection to have.”

Draco took a breath. That made sense. *Everyone* wanted to be friends with the Malfoys. But Draco couldn’t find it in him to puff up with pride right now. This conversation had been weighing on him for weeks now—he just wanted concrete answers. Once Draco understood, his father would gladly accept his help! “But why *you*? Why not your boss or... or an *adult*?”

“The Port Mafia is too busy to send executives for every meet-and-greet. Yokohama comes first, the Malfoys come second.”

There was something Dazai wasn’t saying. Something Draco couldn’t name. Something bigger than—

A chill suddenly ran up his spine as realization set in.

Boss, executives, ambassadors...

This was big.

This was *really* big.

This wasn't one magical group schmoozing with the Malfoy's for a favor or two. It wasn't a group of friends laughing over pranks and schemes. Wasn't Dazai asking, "heads or tails?" like he already knew which way the coin had landed before it even spun twice.

It was an organization. A *city*.

More than just social niceties, Draco thought. The usual Malfoy politics were superficial. This was decidedly *not*.

"Yokohama is a big place," Dazai said. Firelight turned his eyes a murky red. "The magical community is even bigger. The Port Mafia is just sniffing around—you can tell Lucius that."

Draco blinked, suddenly torn from his thoughts. "I wasn't going to tell my father any of this."

"You were. It's fine," Dazai knocked against the side of the desk again. It rattled, hollow. "I would do the same. We're alike, in that way."

"My father isn't my boss," Draco countered, the comparison rankling in his mind. He tried to force some of his usual condescension in his voice, but it was difficult. With Dazai, simple things had a way of complicating like that. "And it's weird that you have one."

Dazai waved him off. "Did you have any other questions? Or did you just want to verify that the Port Mafia exists?"

Somehow, it felt like Dazai hadn't answered any of his concerns at all. Draco's irritation was swamped out by the overwhelming feeling of being well out of his depth.

(But I can handle it, Father! I can help!)

He shook his head. "Last year, with Professor Quirrell. Did your boss tell you to..." the words caught on his tongue.

"To kill him?"

Draco nodded, finding it suddenly a challenge to hold Dazai's gaze.

"No."

Draco blinked. "No?"

"That's just how things worked out. But that's all turned into such a hassle. I should have jsut let Quirrell kill me instead of fighting back." Dazai paused, eyes flicking briefly to the side. "Did Lucius say anything to you about Quirrell?"

'This does not concern you,' his father had said. *'There is nothing for you to do,'* followed by a series of private meetings Draco had pretended not to eavesdrop on.

Draco wouldn't ask again, just what had happened to lead to Quirrell's death. Summer was long and full of unasked questions like that. The long, empty halls of Malfoy Manor had no answers to give. Draco had no answer to give, either. Father stewed, and Mother fretted, and Draco watched from his room.

"Not to me," he responded, only after a few seconds had passed.

"About Voldemort?"

"No."

"Or anything about his test for me?"

Draco's hands turned to fists. "No."

Dazai hummed. Then, he pushed off the desk and stalked across the room to the door. "Bosses are the worst, like that," he said, a pointed grin splitting across his face. Draco wondered what kind of expression that was. "Never telling you anything, even when you're smack-dab in the middle of everything."

Draco jumped in surprise. "Your boss doesn't tell you anything, either?"

Dazai tittered with a tight-sounding laugh. "He tells me more than Lucius tells you, evidently." When Draco's frown fell way into a scowl, Dazai amended, "don't worry, though. I'll be a good boss to you. Hell's Hounds don't benefit from keeping secrets, like that."

Before he could stop himself, Draco asked, "Does Blaise know about the Port Mafia?"

Dazai froze.

Whatever humor was on his face hardened and turned brittle. Then, in the blink of an eye, it was gone.

"He's your best friend," Draco continued. "And he doesn't know."

Another pause. Light caught on the stained glass window, shattering blues and reds across the floor. One of those crimson hues flashed in Dazai's eyes.

Dangerous.

"Ah, Draco is being really mean today!" Dazai whined.

"Then—"

"We're all friends, but this thing between the Port Mafia and the Malfoys is bigger than some silly friendship." Dazai's voice was very suddenly flat, sounding rehearsed. "Some things... *most things* are more important than honesty—just read the Daily Prophet and you'll see what I mean."

Draco stood stock-still, eyes staring at Dazai's, watching.

It felt like, suddenly, he was looking at a total stranger. That uncanny feeling tightened a band around his chest. Why did Dazai sound so *cold*? As though he'd already seen the worst humanity had to offer and was merely imparting pebbles of that knowledge onto Draco now.

"All this mafia business should just be kept between us." Dazai smiled thinly. Something about that expression seemed to be a lie, and Draco's unease only grew. "I think we should leave the others out of it. But since you're a Malfoy, I don't need to keep anything like that a secret from you. I can trust Draco to help me out with Lucius' test. Right? You want our bosses to be happy."

The more Draco heard from Dazai, the more of a stranger the other boy seemed.

"...right," Draco said, voice sounding weaker than he'd wanted.

A second passed. Dazai's severe tone became mirthful.

Like flipping a switch, Draco thought. He tasted bile on his tongue.

"I'm glad! We'll make a good team, I can tell." Dazai tittered, and Draco nearly did a double-take at the other boy's abrupt laughter. *"Ah,* but Draco! We're going to miss dinner if we lollygag anymore. Blaise will yell at me if I don't eat today!"

Do I even know you at all?

Draco's heart skipped a beat.

...Does anyone?

"Are you coming to dinner, Draco?" Dazai asked, smiley. "Since we're such good friends, I promise to sit *reaaally* far away from you."

Maybe his father was right, and Draco had no business trying to help. The more Dazai talked, the more Draco realized just how out of his depth he really was. The more a waxing fear began to curdle in his gut.

But here Dazai was, extending a hand to him and saying things like, *"I can trust you to help me."*

Father had told him not to get involved. Had said he wouldn't be able to do anything.

Dazai was asking to stand by his side and figure it out, anyway.

Even at kind words like that, the guilty feeling in Draco's chest didn't abate. It wriggled and roiled. All this talk of tests and loyalties only left him feeling sick. It was different, being on *this* side of the test. Draco was used to being the one forcing others to prove themselves to him. *Was this how Dazai had felt last year?*

If Dazai recognized that discomfort in him now, he didn't comment. Like it meant nothing at all, being caught between father and friend. Talking about Father's test as if it were just an everyday occurrence for him.

Draco frowned.

Given what little he knew about the Port Mafia... *Maybe it was.*

“The Port Mafia is a scary place,” Draco mumbled with a sigh. He walked to Dazai’s side and opened the door.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” Draco shook his head.

If they were really friends, then why did talking with Dazai about this feel like a betrayal against his father?

Draco wished money could solve this particular problem. But all the galleons in his pockets only made the weight on his chest feel heavier.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading, commenting, etc! see yall next week :)

next up: i wonder what pansy is up to these days...

The Villain

Chapter Summary

Lockhart, then Pansy... could Dazai's day get any worse?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A long, black tail smacked against the floor. The tile resounded with a boom at the force.

“You aren’t doing it right,” Draco said, “at all.”

Ron shot him a glare. “Then give better instructions!”

For the dozenth time in the last hour, Ron held out his hand to Egg. Instead of gently resting her snout on his palm, as Draco had demonstrated, the Norwegian Ridgeback merely eyed Ron. Her tail whapped against the floor again. When she puffed out a breath, a plume of smoke came with it.

“You’re annoying her.”

“You’re annoying *me.”*

Slam!

Ron and Draco both jumped, quibbling coming to a dead stop immediately.

At the desk, Hermione slammed her book shut and turned to face them with a severe look. “Can’t you two just get along, already? I’m trying to read here.”

Draco scowled. “You’re reading *my* book, Gryffindor. At least be grateful!”

“I’m *trying* to read your book.” She sniffed. “It’s only just impossible with all your bickering in the background.”

A Study of Draconic Creatures sat on the desk, protected by Hermione’s hovering hands. The text was positively ancient—pages yellowing and spine broken. To be written by the famed wizard Merlin, it would have to be. But, despite having been dated hundreds of years earlier, the book was well cared for. Ron could rant day and night about how evil the Malfoy family was, but it was undeniable they took good care of their books.

Hermione had read through about a quarter of it already, slowed down by Merlin’s dense, outdated vocabulary and the sound of quarreling children. She wished, privately, that she had

the same kind of command Dazai seemed to wield effortlessly. He'd clap his hands and silence a crowd; say one word and receive a thousand eager answers. Hermione didn't have that kind of charisma.

What she had was her books, and the books had her.

Right now, she had Draco's book.

"It says in chapter four that dragons are very receptive to the emotions of those around them," she recited. "Perhaps Egg doesn't respect you because of all your yelling. Anger isn't something worth respecting."

"What about *condescension*, then?" Ron asked, snappish. "The two of you seem to have that in bounds."

Hermione sighed. "Ron, just try calming down a bit." When Draco snorted, she turned to him. "And Draco, quit provoking Ron. We'll never finish this up if you're always bullying him."
Draco sneered, a biting remark poised on his tongue.

But then, to Hermione's surprise, Draco's didn't bark back. Instead, his shoulders fell and he looked away, silent.

She blinked. That was... an odd reaction for the usually high-and-mighty Malfoy.

Beside him, Ron held out his hand again. He waited, palm up.

Waited, and waited...

"That Merlin bloke didn't know what he was talking about. This isn't working at all."

Hermione rested her hand on *A Study of Draconic Creatures*, offended on the book's behalf.

Then, once again to Hermione's shock, Draco jumped to the book's defense before she could, "The Great Merlin knew all there was to know about dragons. My father wouldn't have given me a worthless book. Maybe you're just too stupid to read it yourself."

"What kind of insult is that coming from a *Malfoy?* Don't you just *buy* all of your grades?"

"I get my grades by being smart—which is more than anyone can say for you!"

"You—!"

"Boys!" Hermione commanded again.

Only, without the slamming of a book to punctuate her voice, it had little impact.

Ron and Draco continued to snap back and forth at one another. It was clear they weren't going to be stopping anytime soon. Once again, Hermione wished she had the skill to channel

Dazai. Seeming to sense it was pointless, Egg let out another smoky breath before flapping her wings. She silently retreated to her nest of pillows.

With all of their bickering, Ron and Draco didn't seem to have even noticed.

Hermione sighed. She cast a longing glance to Merlin's book, but there was no way she could focus with all the—

"I don't even know why Dazai lets you be here!"

"Speak for yourself!"

Hermione pinched the bridge of her brow. "Really, you two..."

Ron crossed his arms, defensive. "This is pointless, anyway. Let's just tell everyone we're buddy-buddy now and be done with it."

"Gladly," Draco sniffed, turning his chin up. With one hand braced against the floor, he pushed himself to his feet. Ron followed not a second after, looking annoyed with himself for not being the one to storm off first. "I'd rather be practicing for quidditch tryouts than wasting my time here with you. They're only a few days away, and I'd like to work in a few extra practices, first."

Ron stopped half-way to a biting remark. Surprise lit his eyes, followed quickly by anger. "You're trying out for the Slytherin team?"

Draco paused.

A second later, realization lit his face. "Don't tell me you're trying for Gryffindor. Quidditch doesn't need another Weasley."

"You're just afraid to lose to three Weasleys at once!"

"So confident you'll make the team?" Draco raised a brow, sounding amused. He looked Ron up and down. "I wouldn't be."

"Well, at least I'm not just planning to buy my spot on the team!"

"I'll have you know—!"

Slam!

Again, they both jumped, startling to face Hermione at the desk. She had slammed the book again—taking the extra effort to pick it up and throw it down. That seemed to be the only way to get everyone's attention. Hermione patted the book in silent thanks for its service. Books had many, many uses, after all.

"Neither of you are going to make the quidditch teams like this," she told them with a pointed look each. "Quidditch is all about teamwork. You two can't go even a second without your wand hands getting twitchy!"

Draco shook his head, annoyance flashing in his eyes. “That Isn't the same thing.”

“It is,” she leveled him with a glare. “And—” Hermione blinked, looking from Ron to Draco once again. It looked like a fire had been lit under them. That was something she could work with. Because wealth and blood feuds were a little out of her wheelhouse. But quidditch? She could work with that. “And I’m going to prove it to you!”

Ron snorted. “What do you know about teamwork, ‘Mione? *Reading* isn’t exactly a two-man sport!”

“Maybe, but I’ve read dozens of books on quidditch. By the end of the week, I’ll have you two working so well together, people will think you’ve played quidditch side-by-side for years!”

Having set her course, Hermione got to her feet. She grabbed *A Study of Draconic Creatures* and held it at her chest. The boys blinked, confused by her sudden shift. She started across the room.

“Er, where are you going?”

“Not up to the job, Gryffindor?”

Hermione sniffed. Suddenly, she whirled on her heels to face them. “Working in here is only stressing Egg and me out. I have a better idea.” She punctuated her next sentence with a pointed finger their way. “Grab your flying brooms—we're practicing quidditch. Together, as one team.”

Draco and Ron gaped. From her nest, Egg seemed to snicker.

“You can’t be serious,” Draco deadpanned.

“I’ll knock him right off his broom if he even looks at me!”

Well...

This would either be a gang-saving miracle, or a catastrophic disaster.

Either way, Hermione thought, it was better than sitting cooped up in this room all week. She couldn’t take even one more minute of their bickering—it was only Tuesday and her ears were already ringing from it.

-

For Dazai, classes tended to blend together.

After all, he was barely permitted to participate in most of them. Lately, he’d at least tried to find some entertainment in using his new-found Magical Sensitivity—feeling out the nuances in different spells, or trying to sense them from across the room. But all that had learned

Dazai was that every transfiguration spell was annoyingly identical, and that Neville was really bad at charms.

The only class that was unchanged from the previous year was History of Magic. And, well... if Dazai slept through that class, it wouldn't make any difference. He *had* slept through it multiple times. Dazai didn't think Professor Binns had even noticed.

Actually—scratch that. Professor Binns was barely cognizant of *anyone* in his class. Dazai didn't think the ghostly professor was still entirely present.

The only exception to this rule was, without a doubt, Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Though not for a lack of trying. The class itself was a complete bore—they spent more time talking about Lockhart's hair-care routine than they did defensive spells. Everything about the class had Dazai rolling his eyes and sharing exasperated looks with Blaise.

What made Defense Against the Dark Arts different wasn't the lessons.

No—it was how Lockhart was constantly calling on Dazai, poking fun at him, and turning the class against him.

Case in point...

"Dazai will read the next passage," Lockhart announced, turning his full attention onto the mafioso. Amusement danced in his eyes. "I'm sure you'll find that this *Rambling Warrick* character fits you quite well. Not very smart, but plenty conniving. If you would just read his lines for us, now."

Dazai raised a brow. He made a show of looking down at his empty desk. "You know I didn't bring my book, professor."

"Still intent on wasting your classmates' time?" Lockhart tutted.

"I could say the same to you."

A few tittering laughs filled the room at that. But, seeing as it was the *Demon Student* who told the joke, the laughter died off quickly. An awkward silence took its place.

Lockhart sighed, sounding deeply aggrieved. It may have convinced Dazai, if not for the professor's expectant and obnoxious tone. "Now, now. No need to lash out." Dazai rolled his eyes. "Come on up to the front of the room. I'll let you read from my book." Then, as an aside to the rest of the class, he added, "I know, I know. Aren't I generous?"

The students were silent in response. Dazai lifted his chin to peer around Blaise's stack of books. He met Lockhart's gaze head-on. "Aren't you worried, letting me so close to you?" He asked, unimpressed with Lockhart's condescending grin. "I mean, I could stab you."

Blaise elbowed him under the table.

“I won’t stab you,” Dazai amended, clearly as an afterthought. “But you shouldn’t want to risk it.”

Silence.

Lockhart stared at him, eyes wide. For a second, he didn’t say anything. Then, he cleared his throat. “Y-yes, well. You *are* something of a brute. I suppose a demon can’t peacefully take instruction.” He shuffled in place, obviously nervous. Dazai smirked, not even bothering to hide his amusement.

Seeing this, Lockhart’s ever-present smile briefly fell into a scowl. “Write that down, class! *A demon can’t do anything without resorting to violence*—this will be on the test next week!”

At the front of the room, Hermione hastily wrote in her notes.

Dazai slumped forward into his palm.

“Well, well...” Lockhart continued, “since our demon won’t read this passage, I suppose I’ll have to assign it as homework. So sorry, everyone. I really try my best for you all, but some people just can’t be reasoned with.”

Complaints rose up around the room. Only a few familiar faces remained quiet—Dazai spotted Draco, Ron, and Hermione among them. Pansy protested the loudest.

“They’ll get over themselves,” Blaise said to him, under his breath.

Dazai shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t need anyone here to like me.”

“But it would be nice to be liked, wouldn’t it?” Blaise asked. He didn’t seem to be expecting an answer when he continued, “Anyway, I don’t think you should keep antagonizing everyone like this. You could get hurt.”

Dazai rolled his shoulders, stooping into himself. Sure enough, more than half the students present had turned in their seats to glare daggers at him. Lockhart, although he was now keeping his focus steadfastly elsewhere, looked pleased with how the situation had turned out. No one in this school—staff or student—was blind to how Dazai was widely regarded. He only had the Daily Prophet to thank for that.

“Can’t be helped,” Dazai grumbled into his palm.

Blaise paused to consider that for a second. Then, he sighed. “I don’t like the thought of you getting hurt.” He glanced to Lockhart, then back to his desk. The notes in front of Blaise were mostly neat and rigid, but sketchy doodles of owls lined the edges—courtesy of Dazai’s wandering quill. “Are we meeting in the Hounds’ office after class?”

Dazai shook his head. “I was going to head to the library.” He wouldn’t be able to sneak into the restricted section in the middle of the day, but Dazai still didn’t think books on the Sensing Stone would be that difficult to find before lunch. “But you’re welcome to check on Draco, Ron, and Hermione if you want. They should be there.”

“That’s all for today, class!”

Dazai and Blaise looked up to see Lockhart, waving his students off. He sorted a stack of papers on his desk, and looked inordinately pleased with himself when Neville bid him a good afternoon.

Across the room, Ron, Hermione, and Draco silently gravitated towards one another. They very carefully didn’t meet one another’s eyes. Dazai and Blaise watched them walk out together, looking more like a group of strangers than friends.

“See? There they go,” Dazai said, listless.

Blaise sighed as he stood. “I’ll catch up with them.”

“Tell Draco I say ‘hi.’” With the other boy still avoiding him, Dazai had been unable to do so himself since their gang meeting the other day. The others were significantly easier to snag a word with.

“Sure,” Blaise said. He watched, wordless, as Dazai rose to his feet as well.

Dazai raised a questioning brow, but Blaise only shook his head.

“Good luck with your research.”

Dazai slung his bookbag over his shoulder. “Thanks. Try not to let those three hurt one another too badly.”

Blaise merely shrugged, as though the idea hadn’t even occurred to him. “They’ll be fine.”

Dazai agreed. They needed a good shove in the right direction, but he knew they would make a fine trio someday. After all, he had seen first-hand Draco and Ron working together before. In the meantime, Hermione and Blaise would help to keep things peaceable.

With a quick farewell, Blaise left. Dazai watched him turn out of the room in the same direction those three took earlier. When Dazai looked back to the classroom, he found it empty save for himself and Lockhart.

Just my luck.

Lockhart took a long, swinging step forward and opened his mouth to speak.

“Do we have to talk?” Dazai asked before Lockhart could even get one word in. He made a show of readjusting his bag.

Lockhart tutted, but didn’t come any closer. It almost looked like, to Dazai’s perceptive eye, the man was half-cowering behind a desk. The confident charm on his lips wasn’t nearly as convincing, given this. “No need to be so hostile. I merely wanted to thank you for your performance!”

Dazai frowned.

“That bit about stabbing me? Genius!” Lockhart laughed. “That will be a great line for my book—*the Demon Student threatened my life; the entire class of innocent little children huddling behind me for safety...”*

Dazai couldn’t help it—he rolled his eyes. Everything about Lockhart was cartoonish. Here he was, hiding behind a desk while professing his own heroics. Dazai laughed, dry and bitter. “If you say so. I was only being honest.”

Lockhart’s golden smile wavered for just a second. He recovered quickly. “N-now, as for next class! I have a few pointers. If, perhaps, you could direct some of these threats to your classmates. A true villain targets the weak, not the strong—myself, I mean. And, really, you do threaten me quite a lot. It’s getting a little stale now.”

“You just want to jump to someone’s rescue.”

Lockhart’s laugh echoed. “Everyone appreciates having a hero come to their aid! Especially by a hero so handsome.”

“Others,” Dazai countered, deadpan, “prefer to be left alone.”

“Exactly!” Lockhart clapped. “Why don’t you pick on one of the quieter students? ...*Ah!* Mr. Longbottom is awfully jumpy. He would make a perfect damsel in distress for me to rescue.”

Dazai hummed. He took a step towards the exit. When Lockhart made no move to stop him, Dazai braced a hand against the door. “I wouldn’t make a good villain if I just did everything the hero asked of me,” he said. Though Dazai’s voice was baked in amusement, he was anything but.

Lockhart was slimy and obnoxious. Unlike Mori, however, he didn’t hide behind sinister lies or manipulative comments. No—Lockhart was blunt and to the point. If Lockhart wanted Dazai to act like the villain to his hero, he would simply say as much. Dazai was less than impressed. Unfortunately, just trying to ignore the persistent man didn’t seem to be yielding any results for Dazai. And threatening Lockhart with bodily harm only stood to write Lockhart’s book for him.

Dazai’s biggest enemy to date was an imbecilic narcissist. It was like talking to a wall.

Lockhart sighed, sounding just as aggrieved as Dazai silently felt. He took a waltzing step forward, but held a chair out in front of him as if for protection. “Come now. Imagine the papers! The headlines! You’d be right on the first page—beside me, of course. Every child your age dreams of celebrity status.”

“I’m already on the front page of every paper.”

Unfortunately. And the word ‘celebrity’ didn’t really apply to Dazai so much as ‘enemy of the people’ did.

“And what are you doing with it? Making yourself a ghost amongst your peers!” Lockhart’s expression was pitying. “My advice? Do an interview. Sign some autographs—a lot of kids

these days find the bad boy type attractive."

"I don't care."

"Oh! I know!" He snapped. "I'll set some interviews up for you! As long as you drop my name once or twice, of course. *'Gilderoy Lockhart is my greatest competition... always foiling my evil schemes...'* something like that would do nicely."

Dazai kicked the door all the way open. He couldn't take much more of this. Lockhart was grating in a way few people could manage. At least when Quirrell cornered him, the man wouldn't look so satisfied with himself about it. Dazai turned on his heel. "Okay. If I don't leave now, I really *will* stab you."

"W-wait!"

Dazai barely spared the professor a glance.

"I wrote you a script—hold on!" Lockhart floundered. The sound of scattering papers and fallen quills echoed whatever the man was doing. Dazai finally relented, turning to see Lockhart bent over his desk, tossing papers around in search of— "Here it is!" He waved a thick stack of papers around in one hand. It must have been dozens of pages long. "A nice long villain's monologue! I thought your dialogue has been a bit lacking. Read this out during dinner today, will you?"

Dazai blinked. Lockhart couldn't be serious.

He *couldn't* be.

He...

...He absolutely was that serious.

"You're an idiot," Dazai said, genuine.

Finally finding some ounce of courage, Lockhart beckoned Dazai to him.

Dazai hesitated for only a second (the thought of simply turning to leave now was strong, but the calling urge to burn Lockhart's script in front of him was stronger). Dazai held his hand out. Lockhart dropped the stack of pages into his palm, looking impressed with himself.

Up close, the script was even more repulsive, somehow.

Line after line about Dazai's supposed evil plans, some made up tragic backstory, various threats to a certain *'handsome and incredible champion of the people...'* Dazai almost threw up in his mouth. He flipped a page, letting the disgust show on his face.

"It says *'make a villainous sneer'* not *'make a face like you're going to be sick,'*" Lockhart chided.

Dazai frowned.

Then, he did just that. *A villainous sneer.* Dazai was no stranger to those.

He gave Lockhart the most sadistic leer he could manage—and it was *plenty* villainous. After all, he'd copied it from some of Port Mafia's best torturers. Venom oozed off him, dripping from the shadows of his eyes. the curl of his lips. Dazai's eyes looked blood red in shadow. A smile curved like a crescent moon. Looking at him, it was impossible to mistake him as a harmless twelve-year old. He was a killer all the way through his blood.

Lockhart *squeaked.*

It was all very satisfying.

With a quiet chuckle, Dazai turned back to the script. He held the papers slack in his hands, deciding what to do with them while Lockhart boasted to himself.

Hmm... Burning them did sound fun, but Dazai still couldn't cast incendio reliably. Maybe a candle..? Dazai glanced to Lockhart's desk. It was a mess of papers and books, but aside from the chandeliers dangling overhead, bore no sign of fire. Dazai was just contemplating shoving the script down Lockhart's too-big mouth when something else caught his attention.

Lockhart followed his gaze.

"Ah, no cheating, now!" He grabbed a paper off the desk. It was marked over in black and red. Written across the top, the paper read, *'DADA Test #1 Answer Key.'* "Although I appreciate the thought, let's not go off script, okay?" Here, he tapped a finger against the monologue. "Practice this, then we can consider maybe letting you cheat on a test or two. I suppose *stopping a cheating scandal* doesn't have the same ring to it as *stopping a homicidal demon,* but it might add some flavor in the middle chapters..."

Lockhart turned away, mumbling to himself.

Dazai's eyes flashed to the test key once more before he finally backed away and left the room. Lockhart could plot his book on his own time. Anyway, Dazai had no desire to listen to the professor's attempt at scripting out all of their interactions any further.

"—and after I defeat you in chapter seven... Hey! Where are you going? I haven't told you off yet about skipping our detention last weekend—!"

Dazai slammed the door at his back.

Good riddance!

Luckily, by the time Dazai finally managed to squirm out of Lockhart's room the hallway was completely empty. The other students must have been either hanging around their common rooms or on their way to lunch by now.

Dazai sighed and shoved the script harshly into his robe's inner pocket. He had wanted to do some research, but that conversation with Lockhart had put him in too foul a mood. It was too difficult to focus with such a negative mood clouding over his thoughts. Lockhart was just too awful, making no efforts to mask his desire to control Dazai's every action.

Maybe Dazai should hunt down the twins instead. They always knew how to cheer him up...

Thinking this, Dazai turned a corner in the direction of the Gryffindor common rooms.

Or... what he *thought* was the right direction.

After about five minutes of wandering, it became abruptly clear that Dazai had taken a wrong turn somewhere. The halls of Hogwarts stretched on before him, unfamiliar and familiar at the same time.

Illogical.

Dazai looked around for a painting. In the past, they had helped him to find his way. Hopefully, now would be no different.

But after another minute of searching, only blank walls answered his search. Slumping forward, Dazai considered just giving up.

“What an awful place to die in,” he grumbled. “And it’ll be days before starvation sets in, too...”

“What are you talking about?”

Dazai blinked out of his thoughts, perking up. Someone else was here! Even if they hated him, they would give him instructions on how to get to the Gryffindor common rooms. Fear was a great motivator like that. Except—

“Snooping around in random corridors, you must be up to no good.” Pansy sneered. “Figures.”

First Lockhart, now Pansy. Today was cursed from the start.

“I’m lost,” Dazai said, smiling. “We’re friends, Pansy. You remember how I always get lost.”

“Ugh,” she made a face. “We were never friends. Don’t even say something like that.”

Dazai opened his mouth to make some bullying remark when, suddenly, a body of students came around the corner and swarmed around Pansy’s shoulders. There must have been a dozen of them.

Apprehension immediately shivered up Dazai’s spine.

Dazai recognized some of them—Crabbe and Goyle, for one. He also spotted the two students who ran into him on the train among the group, Millicent and Tracey. Dazai frowned upon realizing that the mob of people surrounding Pansy ranged from first years to seventh years and they wore colors from every house. The only thing the group all had in common were their matching looks of scathing hatred.

It was pointed directly at Dazai.

“Ah...” Dazai stood straight, shoulders snapping into a stiff line. Trepidation filled his chest. “This doesn’t look good.”

Pansy scoffed. “Drop the act, Dazai. I knew you were bad news from the very beginning. Now that everyone else has finally opened their eyes to your nonsense, I can do something about it.”

Dazai’s eyes flicked to the mob again. A fifth-year student Dazai vaguely recognized gripped their wand in their hand—poised to strike.

“Look at that! Pansy started her own Anti-Dazai club. It’s no Loyalty Club, but I suppose—”

“Shut up! I don’t want to play your games.”

Dazai’s mouth snapped shut. He sobered his grinning expression, giving Pansy a dull look instead. What remained of Dazai’s playful demeanor withered entirely. “Then what do you want, Pansy?” He asked, locking eyes with the other Slytherin. “I’m busy. I don’t have time to play politics with you.”

She scowled, fingers flexing around the wand at her side. “I want you to stop soiling the Slytherin name. I want you to stop soiling Blaise’s name. I want you to drop out. As long as you aren’t *here*, that’s what I want.”

Around her, the mob roared with agreement. Though only the Slytherins seemed to agree with the first half, the overall message was met with raucous encouragement. Cries of, “murderer!” and “demon!” echoed Pansy’s tirade.

As they jeered, the crowd began to spread out. They formed a wall behind Pansy. No escape.

Dazai stared at Pansy alone. His entire body was a careful mask, telling neither of fear nor concern over the situation. Pansy’s mob wasn’t here just to talk—that much was obvious. The way they gripped their wands and squared their shoulders told Dazai they were going to make sure their message stuck.

“There’s been a slight misunderstanding,” Dazai appeased. He held his hands out, nonthreatening. “I’m not doing anything to damage this school or anyone in it. I’ll just be on my way—”

Except when Dazai took a step back, he immediately bumped into something solid. He jumped, then spun to face whatever he’d run into. At some point during the conversation, Crabbe and Goyle must have walked around him. Now, the two Slytherins towered over Dazai’s shoulders, caging him in.

“Ah...”

Suddenly, Goyle reached out to grab him.

Dazai reacted quicker, pinching Goyle's index finger from the air and twisting it back.

Goyle shouted and tried to pull away, but Dazai was fast and dangerous. The finger groaned under him. It bent back obscenely and—

Something yanked Dazai back before he could break the finger.

Crabbe wore a brutish scowl on his face when, abruptly, he clapped a meaty palm down on Dazai's shoulders. He squeezed, trapping Dazai in place. Dazai gave a testing shove, but was unable to shake Crabbe off of him.

Meanwhile, Goyle drew away with a pained yelp, clutching his hand to his chest and wearing a hurt expression.

Something rankled in his gut.

Between Crabbe's hand, Goyle's cracking knuckles, and Pansy's wand-wielding gang behind him, Dazai was well and truly caged.

"...this is a bit much, isn't it?" Dazai asked, eyeing Crabbe, then Pansy.

"You *killed* a teacher. You have no right to talk about doing *too much."* Pansy countered. When she stepped forward, the mob behind her did as well. Dazai's cage shuddered smaller. "You were already a pest when you were just bumbling around at Draco's back. But I guess having no respect for Hogwarts' traditions wasn't enough for you, huh? *Killing a professor...* someone like that shouldn't be here. How long will it be before you decide you want another professor dead? Or a student? One of *us?"*

Dazai blinked. It almost seemed as though Pansy was talking more to her gang than she was to him, now.

Behind Pansy, the crowd made sounds of unsteady agreement. But, now that he was looking closer, Dazai realized hatred wasn't the only thing riling them up. No—shoulders hiked to their ears, palms sweaty around wands, eyes darting from Dazai to Pansy almost frantically.

Fear, Mori's voice echoed in his ear.

They were afraid of him.

It didn't come as a surprise, really. The Daily Prophet had nothing but horrifying things to say about Dazai. He was a demon, a mindless killer, a follower of the dark arts. It was hardly true, of course. But the Daily Prophet had sway over the entire magical community, and Dazai was the only voice arguing against it.

The Daily Prophet wanted people to fear him.

And fear made people do dangerous things.

But...

Pansy wasn't afraid.

Her eyes were scathing, burning flames. Her wand hand was steady and her words were condemning. When Pansy leveled him with a glare and said, “get out of my school,” she meant it with the strongest of convictions. Her hatred of him was bone deep—there was nothing superficial about it—and nothing *fearful* about it.

“Pansy.” Dazai’s eyes narrowed. “You know I have no intentions of doing something like that.”

She scoffed. The crowd, similarly, looked unconvinced. “Do I? I didn’t think you would kill professor Quirrell, yet here we are.”

“Neither did I,” Dazai grumbled, mostly to himself. “The Daily Prophet doesn’t know what it’s talking about. I *know* you remember that whole Quirrell situation playing out differently than how the papers reported it. And you know half the things that happen in Hogwarts don’t ever hit the mainstream media.”

The crowd looked to one another, as if trying to parse out Dazai’s words. Pansy, however, merely scowled. He knew what she was thinking: the mountain troll Dazai killed last year, the monster that got loose in the Slytherin common rooms, their secret Loyalty Club room... all things that had gone entirely unreported on. How could the Daily Prophet’s stories be trusted if they were only ever getting a fraction of the truth?

Pansy shook her head, frown deepening. “I know you’re up to something. You’ve been scheming since the very start.”

Dazai twitched at the accusation. Crabbe must have felt it, because a second later the hand on Dazai’s shoulder gave him a rough shove. He tried not to squirm under the hold.

Pansy watched him, hatred simmering in her every motion. Her wand was still held tightly at her side. Good—Dazai needed to keep it that way. He could handle being berated. Could even handle a punch or two. But Dazai didn’t know what he would do if No Longer Human was revealed in front of all these strangers. They already thought he was a demon—finding out he had a dangerous ability up his sleeves would only rile the Daily Prophet up more.

While Pansy’s wand was kept in check, however, the mob behind her was not. Their anger was twitchy with panic. Wands shifted from one hand to the other, ready to lash out at any moment.

Taking a deep breath, Dazai hunched his shoulders. He tried to make himself look smaller, less threatening.

Only a few of the students untensed. They would need more reassuring, then.

“I’m not planning anything. No one is going to get hurt,” Dazai soothed, speaking directly to the crowd just as Pansy had done moments earlier. They stared at him with wide, disbelieving eyes. Shifting gears, he asked, “Did Pansy rally you all up and ask you to come here?”

No one responded, but Dazai saw them shifting in place and shooting one another glances.

“Pansy has misled you,” Dazai told them. "The Daily Prophet has misled you.”

The grip on his shoulder tightened.

“Everyone knows that you’re a threat to Hogwarts—to everything Hogwarts stands for,” Pansy growled. Then, she whirled on her followers, who startled to attention, “only the bravest students agreed to come with me today. Everyone else was so scared you would hurt them for speaking against you. Do you know how many people are terrified of you? I don’t care what the Daily Prophet says or doesn’t say—no one feels safe with a killer here!”

“R-right!”

“I can’t sleep with him in the same room as me!”

“Any one of us could be next!”

The crowd roared with agreement.

Again, Crabbe yanked Dazai back to keep him in place. This was getting way out of hand—Dazai needed to put an end to this before either No Longer Human was revealed or Pansy started a full-scale mutiny against him.

Rather than rising to the crowd’s level of shouting, Dazai raised a single hand. It silenced them immediately.

It was no use trying to mollify the mob. Their fear had blinded them to reasoning.

No—he'd strike for its head. Kill the beast at its leading point, and the rest would crumble beneath it.

Dazai leveled Pansy with a stabbing stare.

“The only flaw in your reasoning, Pansy, is that *you* aren’t afraid of me.”

Pansy’s eyes snapped to him. “The hell are you talking about? No one wants you out of this school more than me.”

“Sure.” Dazai tried to shrug, but found he could no longer lift his shoulders with how tightly he was being held. “But not because you’re afraid of that hoax ‘demon’ story. In fact, I’d wager that you know I’m not a danger to anyone in Hogwarts. The only one here I’m a threat to is *you.”*

Pansy bristled. Her hand fisted around her wand, tensing but not rising to strike. Yet. “I’m not afraid of you because I’ve seen how pathetic at magic you really are.”

“Be honest, Pansy,” Dazai sighed. “Aren’t you just still jealous that Blaise and Draco like *me* more than they like *you?”*

“Shut up!”

Bulls-eye, Dazai thought.

Pansy's outraged screech was the only answer Dazai received. For a brief moment, everything was still. Then—

Goyle raised his fist and swung.

Dazai's head snapped to the side. White hot pain bloomed across his left cheek and he stumbled away from the hit. It was only Crabbe's hand on his shoulder that kept Dazai from tumbling to the floor. In his mouth, Dazai tasted blood. It took a second for him to regain his bearings, vision swimming from the punch. He blinked several times.

Dazai's eyes flashed to Pansy. She was breathing fast, body thundering with each gasp. Her knuckles were white around her wand. What was angry before was now enraged.

Slowly, Dazai raised a hand to his cheek. He winced at the sting, but Crabbe's fist didn't appear to have broken the skin. It would definitely bruise, though.

The taste of iron drowned out Dazai's senses from where he'd bit his tongue. He swirled the blood and mucus in his mouth then spat. Blood splattered out across the tile floor, so deep and dark it was almost black.

A ripple of unease rolled through the mob at Pansy's back.

"Ow," Dazai grunted. "If you're going to kill me, make it quick. I don't like pain."

Finally, he up-righted himself. Crabbe tugged him again, and Dazai wobbled into place. When a dribble of blood rolled down his chin, the mafioso smeared it off on the back of his hand.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Pansy's words were acrid in the air. "You're manipulating Draco and Blaise just like you're trying to manipulate us now."

The other students shifted nervously on their feet. Dazai glanced to them briefly, but turned away when they reeled back in trepidation.

Dazai stared Pansy down with half-lidded eyes instead.

Most children, Dazai thought, would at this point begin to cry.

Or beg. Or feel at least the slightest hint of panic at what was to come. Would the blows continue? Would the jeers ever stop? Why does everything have to hurt all the time? At this point, a normal child might turn to desperate pleas of forgiveness. Otherwise, they may fall entirely silent, thinking, *if I stop reacting, maybe they'll just leave me alone.*

But the swell of blood in Dazai's mouth filled him with nothing more than an unbearable exhaustion.

Hogwarts wasn't any different than the Port Mafia back home. It was all classless, brute force no matter where he went. Father's fist or Goyle's. Mori's smile or Lockhart's.

“Pansy,” Dazai said with a dull voice, “I don’t care enough about you to want to manipulate you.”

Her eyes widened. A tremor of muted conversation rolled through the crowd behind her. Pansy stammered for a second before biting out, “I don’t believe you. Anyone with half a brain cell can see you’re no good. Since the very start, you’ve done nothing but make trouble for the people around you.”

“Who cares about any of that.”

Crabbe yanked his shoulder back. Dazai let himself be rag-dolled, uncaring. At his other side, Goyle grabbed his other arm. The grip was oppressive. Dazai couldn’t fight back if he wanted to.

“I can’t believe Dumbledore even let you back this year.”

Dazai watched as, slowly, Pansy lifted her wand.

It pointed at his chest, as volatile and focused as a gun.

The magic in the air burst into action, swirling around the wand’s pointed tip. Dazai could feel it even from a distance—a jumble of magical sensation.

Shit.

Once she formed the spell’s cast on her lips, it would all be over.

The spell nullified, No Longer Human revealed—!

He could kick back and break Goyle’s knee. That might buy him a second to dodge...

Dazai lifted his leg.

“This’ll teach you to keep to yourself—”

“What in Salazar’s name is happening here?”

Crabbe and Goyle startled, dropping their holds on Dazai immediately.

He stumbled, falling forward on a half-raised foot. The second Dazai was able, he took a step away from them, but the band around his chest didn’t loosen. Pansy jumped as well, fumbling with her wand. It clattered noisily on the floor, then rolled several feet away from her.

Silence reigned across the gathered crowd as everyone’s eyes snapped to far end of the hall.

Gemma.

The Slytherin prefect and upperclassmen stared the mob down with a severe expression and mouth agape.

She radiated a mix of outrage and stupefaction.

“Gemma!” Pansy jumped, clearly not expecting the prefect to be here. “We were just having a talk with Dazai—*the Demon Student.* You know how awful he is!”

Gemma stared for a long second before shaking her head. Any surprise on her face was wiped away, only a cold stare remaining now. Her eyes flicked across the corridor, taking everything in. The more she looked, the darker her expression grew.

Dazai wondered what type of scene they all must have made: Pansy’s wand thrown aside, a body of angry students at her back while two meatheads stood guard over Dazai’s shoulder. The bruise on Dazai’s face. The blood on the floor.

“This doesn’t look like a *talk* to me,” Gemma said as her shoes *tap-tap-tapped* across the tile floor. She stopped only once she was positioned directly between Dazai and Pansy—evidently having correctly identified them as the primary instigators. “This looks like a *duel*.” She glanced Dazai’s way, eyes lingering over Crabbe and Goyle for a second. Something flashed in her eyes. “And not a fair one, either. You two—” Gemma jerked her head “—get away from him.”

Crabbe and Goyle froze. They cast an asking glance to Pansy, before seeming to decide better of it. They ducked around Dazai as fast as their legs would permit. Gemma watched them with a careful eye as they both took shelter at Pansy’s shoulders.

“Good,” Gemma said, serious. Now, with everyone unable to maim one another any further, she took another second to carefully assess the situation. Thoughtful eyes raked over Pansy, her mob, then Dazai in turn. She lingered over Dazai for a too-long second. Whatever she made of his slouching, bruised form, Gemma didn’t say. She shook her head and reeled on Pansy a second later. “You can all leave. I’ll have a word with Dazai, then we’ll consider this mess settled.”

Dazai shrugged himself fully upright.

Pansy seemed to disagree. “You can’t be serious!” She squawked, snatching her wand from the floor. It was only after a pointed look from Gemma that she returned it to her cloak rather than pointing it Dazai’s way again. “Gemma! He’s—”

“I know who he is,” Gemma silenced her with a raised hand. “I’ll take care of it. You and your... *group*... can leave, now.”

“Gemma...”

“Pansy,” the prefect said, serious. “I understand that this situation is very complicated. Because of that, I’m electing to handle this internally—between you, me, Dazai, and your friends here. But if this situation were any less politically charged—and if you take it even one step further—I will not hesitate to bring the staff into this. You understand that, as a prefect, that is my *actual* prerogative.”

Pansy drew in a shaking breath, anger just below the surface. She stared at Gemma for a long few seconds before, finally, snapping her head to the side. Gemma's merciful offer was too kind to turn down. "*Fine*," she bit the word out one letter at a time. "I'll leave."

The crowd at her back shifted. Pansy whirled on them.

"We're leaving. Can't you people listen?!"

They jumped, but made quick work of scampering out of Pansy's way after that. Not even a minute passed before the hallway, once crowded and cramped, was empty. Pansy cast a single, parting glare Dazai's way before leaving as well.

With only the two of them remaining, Dazai suddenly found he could breathe a little easier.

"Are you okay?" Gemma asked suddenly.

Dazai stared at her, then offered an intentionally shaky grin. "I'm fine."

She didn't look like she believed him.

It was no wonder, really. 'Caged in and defensive' had never been a good look on Dazai. Father had once likened him to a feral dog, in instances like this. Times where Dazai could do nothing but make do with being held down and hurt. Wearing a sharp look on his face, eyes sunken and spine curled in. Dazai looked the picture of damaged goods just one second away from breaking apart entirely. Mori had smiled and said his 'feral puppy' look was actually quite adorable, to which Dazai had promptly responded, *"if I have to be your dog, then I'll bite you."*

Mori's resulting amusement was not at all warranted.

Thankfully, Gemma didn't share any of Mori's fawning proclivities. Instead, she merely gave him a quick once-over, then said, "If you're hurt too badly, go to the infirmary."

Dazai raised a brow. At the same time, he ran a hand across his robes to smooth out any wrinkles. Crabbe and Goyle hadn't been kind to the fabric. Dazai suspected his rumpled clothes were only making him look more pathetic. Though it might benefit him here for Gemma to continue viewing him as a victim, he would still have to clean up before going to lunch.

"If I do that, Madam Pomfrey will find out what happened." He smiled wryly. "I thought you wanted to keep the staff out of this?"

Gemma sighed. "While I would rather not start a whole fuss over this incident," she eyed Dazai, "I won't stop you."

Dazai closed his eyes in thought. They *all* benefited from keeping quiet about Pansy's... attack. If the Daily Prophet caught wind of this, they would only turn the story on its head. Dazai would get more press he didn't want. The Slytherin name would further be trampled through the mud. Hogwarts would have to make a statement, which would inevitably force them to publicly decide if the Demon Student maybe should be expelled, after all.

Word would reach Lucius and Mori. If they thought Dazai had lost a duel, their deal might fall through.

When Dazai opened his eyes, Gemma was anxiously waiting for an answer one way or the other.

“It’s nothing a little make-up can’t cover,” Dazai said after a long moment.

Gemma nodded, looking a little relieved at that answer. “I don’t know the healing spell, or I’d mend that bruise myself. I’m sorry.” She sounded genuinely apologetic.

Dazai shook his head. It wouldn’t have worked on him, anyway.

“I’ll manage,” he said, lightly. Dazai had considered, briefly, telling Gemma something along the lines of, *‘it’s okay—the pain will remind me not to cause any more trouble,’* but quickly decided against it. He wasn’t sure something like that would be received nearly as well at Hogwarts as it would in Yokohama.

Gemma stared at him for a moment, as if trying to read his thoughts. But Dazai took pride in being incomprehensible. She wouldn’t find anything.

After a second, Gemma seemed to reach the same conclusion and her shoulders dropped in defeat.

Dazai took pity on her. “You wanted to have a word with me?” It couldn’t just be to check on his well-being. She didn’t need to send Pansy away for something trivial like that.

She sighed. “I’ll get straight to point.” Gemma cleared her throat, preparing for what she was going to say next. “My job, first and foremost, as a prefect is to take care of the students. Despite what everyone has to say about you being some kind of demon, you’re a Slytherin student first.”

Dazai nodded. He remembered speaking with Gemma last year during the *‘oops-my-pet-dragon-got-loose’* incident. Keeping the students safe had been her main priority then, as well.

“So I won’t sit idly by when you’re being hurt. I'll do my job as a prefect and keep the peace between Pansy... between *everyone* and you.” She paused. Dazai could feel a *‘but’* coming...

“But,” she said, “if for even one second you think about hurting your classmates, it’s over. I don’t care what the Daily Prophet has to say about you—you really *could* be a demon for all I care. But keep your claws to yourself.”

Dazai laughed. “And then you’ll loose Pansy and her wolves after me?”

“And then I’ll have you expelled.”

Dazai blinked.

Gemma was really serious about her job. Lucky for them both, Dazai really had no intentions of harming any of the students here unless backed into a far corner. And, despite his threats, he also had no designs of maiming Lockhart (regrettably).

“Scary,” he keened. Then, he raised his hands, appeasing. “I’ll watch my claws. I wasn’t planning anything like that, anyway.”

Gemma’s eyes briefly flicked to Dazai’s gloved hands. For just a second, wariness flashed in her eyes—as though wondering if he really *was* hiding monstrous claws below the leather.

He wasn’t, of course. No Longer Human was far more dangerous.

“Good,” she said haltingly. “Let’s keep it that way.”

Except—

Lucius’ test for the Port Mafia was still an unknown. Somewhere nearby, sometime soon, Dazai would be faced with this test—this show of power. And once those cards fell into place, Dazai would do whatever it took to pass. If that meant hurting a few students here and there...

Well, Dazai would just have to get his hands dirty.

-

“It’s scary,” Ginny wrote. Below her quill, the diary’s paper was fine and soft. It was of high make—not something a Weasley should have been able to afford. She was lucky to find it, tucked away with her other books after returning home from Flourish and Blotts. *“Without Mom here to stand up for me. And my brothers all have their own friends, too. I think they like Dazai more than they like me. We’re family! Isn’t that cruel? It’s like I’m all alone here.”*

‘You have me, Ginny,’ the diary wrote back, ink black as tar. *‘You won’t ever be alone again.’*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Happy birthday to all, and thanks for commenting/kudos-ing etc! :D

see yall next week!
next up: Hermione and the library!

Suspicions

Chapter Summary

Poppy and Severus talk. Dazai does some research.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Dare I ask why you're undermining me, Severus?"

Severus jumped, head snapping up from the books he was huddled over. "When did you come in?" He growled. "Knock."

Gildeory Lockhart waved him off, striding across the room until he was just on the other side of Severus' desk. He walked with swaying, casual steps—as though he had any right to be here. "Knock? But we're dear friends, Severus! Old classmates! I'll admit, you're a bit out of my typical realm of friends, but everyone needs to befriend an outcast once or twice. It's part of my benevolent charm."

Severus glanced to the door, finding it wide open. He hadn't heard the man enter, and he *certainly* hadn't been expecting his grating presence today. Hence why the door was meant to be securely shut and why his desk was covered in various books and papers. Research regarding a certain bandage-wearing, hyper-magically sensitive second year student.

Research that Gilderoy was not a part of.

"Why are you here?" With a scowl, he slammed his book shut. He threw a stack of student essays over top it, covering the title from view.

Gilderoy raised a brow, a phony-looking pout on his lips. "Why, Severus! I merely stopped by to chat with an old friend—"

"We aren't friends. We were never friends. We will never *be* friends," Severus deadpanned. "What do you want."

Gilderoy laughed. "Always a buzzkill, aren't you?" He reached out to grab something on the desk.

Severus smacked his hand away. "I am not attempting to undermine you any more than you already do that to yourself," he said, suddenly remembering the nonsense Gilderoy had said upon entering.

Gilderoy tutted, but thankfully kept his hands to himself without needing another reminder. “Not so! Just last week, I gave one of your students a detention, only he never showed up! You need to keep your students in line, Severus!”

“Who?”

“Hm?”

“Who skipped their detention?” Severus repeated. He could already feel a headache coming on. “If one of my snakes is skipping detention, then I’ll have a talk with them.” *The sooner you tell me, the sooner you’ll leave me alone.*

Gilderoy puffed. “That demon boy, Dazai Osamu! Who else?”

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. That headache would be a migraine within the hour.

Dazai. *Of course* this was about that troublesome boy.

“I’ll speak with him about it.” Have mercy on any student unlucky enough to be stuck with Gilderoy for an hour-long detention. Even if it was a troublemaker like Dazai. Perhaps especially Dazai. “Now leave.”

“That’s all?” Gildeory tutted. He looked severely put-upon, despite being the one who had done the barging-in. “You aren’t understanding, Severus. I’m trying to meet with that demon during detention, and he’s using you as an excuse. You can’t just let that kind of disrespect go unpunished, *hm?”*

Severus gave him an unimpressed look. “That doesn't surprise me.” He paused. Then, unable to prevent himself from snapping, he added a biting, “and don’t call your own student a demon, Gilderoy. He’s only a boy.”

Gilderoy, again, brushed him off. “He *is* a demon, Severus! Aren’t you reading the papers? I made a statement in the Daily Prophet just the other day about it.”

Severus sighed, deep and long-suffering. “I will speak with Mr. Dazai about it during our next lesson on Saturday. You are welcome to leave now.”

“Saturday?” Gildeory blinked several times. “You really have class with him on Saturday?”

Severus stared. “Yes.”

Something about Gilderoy’s expression struck him, and realization dawned over Severus.

“Don’t tell me Mr. Dazai’s so-called excuse was our Remedial Magics class.”

Gildeory sputtered and he took a step back.

Right.

Of course it was.

“He has class with me on Saturdays. Schedule your detentions for Sunday, and he won’t skip,” Severus continued, speaking over Gildeory’s stunned silence. “Could you not have discussed this with Mr. Dazai yourself, Gilderoy?”

Gildeory made some flailing motion with his hands before abruptly stopping. He pasted one of his typical, charmless grins across his face. “Well, you know how it is with demons, Severus! I can’t trust a word out of that boy’s mouth. Perhaps, if he’d explained the situation to me fully, I wouldn’t have been forced to confront you about his behavior like this.”

“I don’t care what he said or didn’t say to you,” Severus intoned. “Now that you have your answer, leave.”

“Severus, Severus!” He tutted. “So rude to your good friend and colleague!”

“I don’t know you.”

“Now, what are you doing in here all alone, anyway? Perhaps I could lend a helping hand! In thanks for clearing up your student’s foolish mistake, that is.”

“I would rather brew my own poison and drink it.”

Severus needed somewhere he could research in peace. Somewhere students wouldn’t bother him. Somewhere where Gilderoy wouldn’t follow.

“...Severus? What do you say? Oh! Are you shy, being offered help by one of society’s greatest heroes? No need! I’m a man of the people, after all.”

A stack of medical textbooks stared up at him.

...Ah.

Severus knew just the place.

-

The Hogwarts’ library was a sprawling mass of information. Row after row of shelves, each stuffed to the brim with books. On a normal day, any number of bookish students could be found milling about there. Even a few of the less intellectually inclined students often flocked here—whether it be for their favorite author’s latest work or simply to have a moment of quiet. The library was always quiet. Madam Pince wouldn’t have it any other way.

Today, the library was empty.

Dazai couldn’t help but to find it distracting. He’d read one sentence, then look up.

No one.

Another sentence.

No one.

Another—

“Are you getting any reading done, like that?”

Dazai’s eyes snapped to Hermione, across the table. “Yes,” he lied.

She raised a brow. The book in front of Hermione, *Magical Artefacts in History,* was nearly half-way finished. She cast a telling gaze at Dazai’s own book, *Magical Sensitivity, a Complete Guide.* Barely a quarter of the way in.

It might have been embarrassing, if Dazai’s nerves weren’t spent fraying over other things.

“Not really,” Dazai admitted with a sigh and casting another not-so-subtle glance around the library. It was still empty. Silent. Half-an-hour earlier, a few unfamiliar Ravenclaws had walked into the library, spotted Dazai, then promptly high-tailed it out of there. Since then, no one else had even walked by the front door. “This book isn’t telling me anything I don’t already know, anyway.”

That wasn’t *exactly* true. Magical Sensitivity was a very broad subject. This book could tell him anything from the most basic of definitions to the most hyper-specific of case studies. It really would have made for an interesting read, had Dazai the focus to actually *read* it.

But it still didn’t have what he was looking for. No mention of a white Sensing Stone, nor the dark thing hiding within it. *Magical Sensitivity, a Complete Guide* wasn’t looking all that *complete* from Dazai’s perspective.

Hermione hummed. She pushed her own book aside, turning her full attention onto Dazai. “You’ve barely even read it, Dazai. If it has the answer you’re looking for, you aren’t going to find it—” she made a show of looking to the empty library around them, “—out there. What’s got you so distracted? Is everything okay?”

Dazai tore his eyes off the empty space again, this time accompanying the movement with a plastered-on smile. “I'm not distracted. Look at all the reading I’ve done!”

It was pointless to even attempt claiming as much, but Dazai liked going through the motions, regardless. It was a familiar routine. Hermione’s disbelieving stare was expected.

“Seriously, Dazai, are you okay?”

"...I'm contemplating how many paper cuts it would take to bleed out?"

Hermione glared at him.

"...Yeah. I wouldn't believe that one, either. Papercuts hurt to much to be a viable method of —" Dazai cut himself off just before saying *suicide*. He knew how much Hermione disliked him bringing it up, and didn't really want the fuss today. "—of. *Uh.* Torture?"

Hermione's stare was unwavering.

Dazai cleared his throat.

“How are things going with Ron and Draco?” He asked instead.

Hermione blinked at the non-sequitur, then frowned. “Avoiding the question isn’t going to make me stop asking.”

“Neither is avoiding mine,” Dazai drawled. He leaned forward and rested his cheek in his palm. A second later, he regretted it. Pain throbbed across his face as Dazai accidentally pushed into the still-healing bruise.

Goyle could really pack a punch. At least Dazai had the foresight earlier to steal a housemate’s makeup for a hasty coverup. He didn’t really need the extra attention a shiner like that would give him. Not from the other students, and *certainly* not from the staff. Dazai could practically see Snape’s assessing stare now. And Pomfrey’s, for that matter.

Or Lockhart’s. *Bleh.*

Hermione’s brows furrowed together briefly when Dazai, half-way to leaning into his palm, suddenly folded his hands together instead. He watched her, waiting, rather than give an explanation. Confusion spiked across Hermione’s face, but she dismissed it shortly.

“Well,” she said. “Things are going well.”

Dazai waited for more. When there was none, he prompted, “Blaise tells me you three aren’t working with Egg anymore.” Even with no one present, Dazai still dropped his voice into a whisper when talking about their illicit dragon.

Hermione mirrored his hushed tone. “Those two could fight forever, if I let them. Practicing quidditch instead let them work out their differences. Besides, it’s something they have in common. And they’re both actually quite good, with a little coaching.” Something private and proud flickered across her expression as she spoke. Dazai, amusedly, wondered how much of a hand Hermione had in said coaching.

“And they didn’t kill each other? Impressive.”

Dazai remembered Blaise saying that quidditch was a quite violent sport. That the two hadn’t beaten one another senseless was a surprise. And a relief. The Port Mafia had enough in-fighting right now for Dazai to want to steer clear of it for the rest of his (hopefully short) lifetime.

“Tryouts are tomorrow,” Hermione told him. “Next week, we find out who makes the teams.”

“Give them my best.”

“I will,” she said, smiling. Then, she paused as if something had just occurred to her. “Oh..! I haven't seen you and Draco together since school started—aside from the other day, of course. If Draco is avoiding you... can I ask why?”

Dazai waved her off. “Too proud to hang out with a demon.”

Hermione's fingers clenched into a fist. Something dark flickered across her face too-fast to track. "You aren't a demon."

"That's beside the point." Dazai shrugged, as if hearing Hermione say that so casually wasn't just a little bit relieving. "Draco and I are on the same page about this. Don't worry about it."

Questions danced across Hermione's expression. She looked ready to ask any number of them, but something in Dazai's expression must have stopped her. "If you're certain," Hermione said, hesitating.

"I am," he said. Then, "And those two are getting along, now?"

"Much better," Hermione confirmed with a sudden smile. "They work surprisingly well as a team. Off the field, less so. But they're getting better!"

Dazai nodded. "Getting Ron and Draco to tolerate each other is no easy feat. Good job."

Hermione beamed, pride turning her face a healthy shade of red. "All the better for it," she said, "since it gives me time to research with you."

Dazai's eyes slid back to the books sprawled out in front of them. As always, Dazai wanted to research at least a dozen subjects all at once, but had only the time for one. Today, curiosity over the Sensing Stone won out. Not that he was making any progress with it. With how much Dazai's mind was wandering at the moment, Hermione's presence was greatly appreciated.

"Now that I've answered your question," Hermione said, sounding undeservedly quite smug. Dazai turned away from his thoughts with an expectant frown. "You have to answer mine: what's got you so distracted?"

Dazai huffed. He cast another look around the room. After a second, Hermione did the same. There was no dawning comprehension in her eyes, though. Only asking.

"The library is empty," Dazai admitted, having decided after a moment to humor his subordinate. "It's suspicious."

Now, that smug look was quickly being replaced with confusion. "Suspicious?"

In his mind's eye, Dazai saw an empty hallway. Saw that hallway fill almost instantaneously with a mob of angry students. Saw Crabbe's hand on his shoulder, Goyle's fist raised, Pansy's simmering glare.

Saw that it could happen again at any moment.

Dazai didn't relay any of this, of course.

"The library is never empty."

"Isn't it?"

“No. You just get too wrapped up in your books and don’t notice.”

Dazai, meanwhile, always had one eye open on his surroundings. As much as he could bare to, anyway. He would never admit to the dozens of times he, too, had been too drawn into his readings to realize someone was approaching him.

But those had been friends. Fred, George, Blaise... Now that everyone was his enemy, Dazai couldn’t afford to be lax.

Not after yesterday.

“Oh.” Hermione’s mouth dropped into an ‘O.’ She looked around the library—really looked, this time. The other tables were empty and the rows of books were going unread. Madam Pince was the only other occupant, quietly flipping through papers at the front desk. The librarian didn’t spare them a glance. “That is odd,” Hermione said after a moment. Looking back to Dazai, she asked, “is something going on, today?”

Other than half the school plotting out my demise? “Not to my knowledge.”

“Still,” Hermione said, now half-watching the room and half-watching Dazai’s face for a change in expression, “that’s nothing to be worried over. Something else has got you distracted.”

Rather than answering, Dazai drew a cheeky grin across his face. “Is Hermione curious to know what I’m thinking? I’m flattered.”

She rolled her eyes at his antics, but Dazai didn’t miss how her cheeks dusted over pink, regardless.

Not giving Hermione another chance to question his carelessness, Dazai reached out to tap the corner of her book. “Never mind all that. Have you found anything?”

Hermione stared at him for a moment. Clearly, she knew Dazai was deflecting the conversation. That didn’t stop her from answering, however. An excited glimmer lit her eyes. “This Sensing Stone item is really very interesting! And rare! You said Madam Pomfrey has one?”

“For my awful Remedial Magics lessons,” Dazai told her. “She and Professor Snape are convinced high Magical Sensitivity is the reason I can’t spell cast.”

“An over-sensitivity to magic making it difficult to spell cast...” Hermione trailed off, looking deep in thought. “That could be. It’s a wonder I didn’t think of that possibility sooner!”

“Even I didn’t know I was more sensitive than anyone else until I saw the Sensing Stone myself.”

Hermione nodded, though she seemed to still be more thoughtful over the revelation than relieved with Dazai’s reassurances. “But...” she paused, as if mulling over what she was about to say, “if you haven’t told Madam Pomfrey about your... *thing*. How can you be sure?”

“Thing?”

“Nullification,” she whispered, only as loud as she dared.

Even with Hermione keeping her voice low, Dazai couldn’t help the almost desperate flick of his eyes around the library. Still empty—no one could have overheard. Dazai pulled on one of his bandages. It loosened ever-so-slightly around his wrist and the tension in his chest loosened all the same.

Hermione had a point, of course.

But there was something about her insistence that gave Dazai pause. It almost seemed as if Hermione had given this topic some significant thought. Which could only mean—

He leveled Hermione with a pointed stare. “You were researching my—” *don’t say Special Ability* “—*thing* weren’t you!” Dazai chastised, though he made a noticeable effort to keep his voice from rising too much. “Didn’t I tell you not to bother?”

Hermione puffed out her cheeks. “You said it would be *pointless*, not that it was *prohibited*.” As though there were a difference, where Dazai was concerned. Unperturbed, Hermione continued, “I’ve never heard of something like complete magical nullification before. And after reading half the books in here? Neither has anyone else. Of *course* I’ve been researching it!”

Dazai stared Hermione in the eye for a second before pulling back. He slumped into the arm of his chair with a huff. “And? Did you find anything?”

She hadn’t. Dazai already knew as much. It was nearly impossible that Hermione found a book that Dazai hadn’t already poured over last year. A second later, when Hermione’s defiant expression slipped, Dazai was proven right on the matter.

“No,” Hermione said, defeat darkening her gaze. “You were right. Still—”

Dazai waved her off. “Research for another day,” he said, watching as Hermione’s eyes immediately lit up. “In the meantime..?” Here, he gestured to Hermione’s open book.

“Right!” Hermione said, sitting up a bit straighter at the prospect of sharing what she’d learned. She pushed her book across the table, spinning it so Dazai could read. Dazai leaned in to quickly skim the page while Hermione explained, “just like you said, a Sensing Stone can tell you how sensitive to magic you are. Lighter colors like, yellow, are typical for most powerful wizards. But look, here—” she tapped a quick one-two beat on the paper, “the famed wizard Merlin supposedly could see white, when he looked. That’s what you saw, right?”

Dazai perked up. “That’s right,” he said, now bowed over the page.

The author of *Magical Artefacts in History* had written, *"When asked, Merlin reportedly told fellow wizards that he was able to perceive the Sensing Stone as being a pure, faultless white.*

Due to a lack of documentation during this time period, it is unclear as to the validity of this claim."

“I wasn’t lying about it, though,” Dazai said with a pout.

Hermione shrugged. She pulled the book back to herself, reading for another minute before responding. “Maybe Merlin wasn’t, either. He *was* the most powerful wizard to ever walk the earth, after all. It's not really that surprising for someone like that to be so sensitive to magic.”

Dazai blinked. Slowly, he raised his eyes from the book to Hermione’s face.

As if suddenly realizing the implications of what she said, Hermione frantically began to shake her head. “I am *abosultely not* saying you’re on the same level of power as Merlin. I’m merely saying that there *is* a precedence for this.”

Dazai smirked, wide and toothy. “No, no. I’m the next coming of your great-and-powerful Merlin!”

"If you want to be as powerful as Merlin, you need to start participating in class. Doing your homework. Passing your tests.”

Dazai shrugged her off, still grinning ear-to-ear. “If you say so,” he said, winking.

Hermione sputtered.

Despite his joking demeanor, Dazai was actually silently considering that tidbit of information.

A level of Magical Sensitivity equal to that of the long-passed Merlin? The supposedly strongest wizard in all history? It seemed like a stretch. Sure, Dazai had a certain proclivity for feeling the latent magic around him, but he couldn’t do anything with it. Still, to be on the same level as a figure like *Merlin*...

“Anyway, the Sensing Stone is pretty straight forward. The color you see indicates how much magic you are capable of sensing. Merlin theorized that it may have further capabilities, if a wizard sensitive enough ever came along. But that’s all just theory.” She paused, glancing up from her book. “Was there something specific you wanted to know about it?”

Dazai carefully parsed out all of Hermione’s words, mind grasping on two in particular: *further capabilities.* An image of something dark and writhing came to mind—the strange other thing he had seen in the Sensing Stone last week. “Not sure yet,” he said, purposefully vague. "What else did Merlin have in mind?”

Hermione hummed. She flipped the page, skimmed, then flipped again. A few minutes passed before she started to relay, “hard to say. According to this book, it was all hypothetical. Merlin supposed it may be possible to use as a scrying tool.” She glanced up. “That is, to search for things that can’t be found. That could be people, items, places... But the Sensing Stone is *very* powerful. Merlin suspected it’s scrying abilities would surpass that of any other type of magic.”

Well... Dazai hadn't seen anything to indicate that. He could pretty confidently say that black he saw in the Stone was connected to No Longer Human—not some scrying ability. It was an interesting thought, though. Maybe something to experiment with later, if need be. But for now it was unimportant.

Though he did have another lesson with Snape coming up. It couldn't hurt to look for the Sensing Stone then. See if it couldn't do anything more than make a storm cloud.

Movement caught Dazai's eye.

He forced himself away from where Hermione's fingers were tracing over a sentence in her book.

Dazai tensed, preparing for an attack.

A second later, however, it proved unnecessary.

"You two look hard at work!" George greeted with a raised hand

"Or hardly working," Fred added with a wink, his eyes falling knowingly to the book Dazai had discarded earlier. Dazai ignored him.

Hermione blinked up at them, a small smile lighting up her face. "Hello, Fred, George. Come to study?"

They snorted. "Nope!" Despite saying so with much enthusiasm, Fred and George immediately saddled into the table's other seats.

"Come to see how empty the library is?" Dazai asked. "Or to figure out how many paper cuts it takes to kill a man?"

"Just checking in," George said. Then, eyes twinkling, he said, "And at *least* a thousand."

"Well, that and investigating some gossip," Fred said.

Hermione and Dazai blinked. "Gossip?"

Dazai felt his eyes narrow automatically. He had an awful feeling this was somehow about him—most things seemed to be, these days.

"Rumor has it, Dazai got in a fight the other day," the Weasley twins said as one. Despite their light tones, Dazai wasn't blind to the undercurrent of concern in their eyes.

Of course, Dazai mentally groaned.

Hermione gasped, whirling on her research partner.

For his part, Dazai merely sighed. It was about him, after all. Although... curiosity prickled at him. "I was sure Gemma was trying to keep that under wraps," he said, non-accusatorially.

With a mob that big, someone leaking the fight wasn't too unusual. Still, something niggled at his brain. "Who told?"

A quick glance at the twins proved he was right, when Fred and George shared one of their looks.

Fred cleared his throat. "Probably some wee-baby first-year," he shrugged. "But! That's not how we found out."

They smiled mischievous smiles, lips curled.

Dazai couldn't help it—he was a little enchanted by how Fred and George could draw out the fun in their pranks and dramatics. He smirked. "*Eh?* You're not keeping secrets from your favorite boss, are you?"

"Only boss," Hermione interjected, not unkindly.

"'Course we're not keeping secrets from you!"

Fred wiggled his fingers. "Well, maybe a little."

Dazai pouted, ready to drag the truth out of them with puppy-dog-eyes if need be. Fred and George seemed to realize the onslaught of whiny begging heading their way, because they were quick to spring into action.

"You're going to love this, Snakey," as George spoke, Fred reached into his cloak for something. Dazai watched them, amused and intrigued at once. "We were gonna show you last year, but—" he blew a raspberry. "Well, we all know how last year worked out."

Finally, Fred found what he was looking for. From his cloak, Fred pulled out a rolled-up piece of parchment. It was thin and yellowing at the edges.

The moment Dazai laid his eyes on it, he knew it was charmed. Magic droned off of it in small but noticeable waves.

Fred and George both gave the library a cursory once-over before leaning forward to explain, "The Marauder's Map," they said, tones hushed, "bet you're curious what it does, *hm?"*

There was no sign of recognition on Hermione's face, telling Dazai that this Marauder's Map wasn't some well-known or well-researched artifact. For his part, Dazai was also drawing a blank.

The twins seemed to take their cluelessness with good humor.

"Well? Any guesses as to what it is?"

"Do we have to spell it out for you?" Fred tutted

Deciding to humor them, Dazai guessed, "some kind of charmed map of Hogwarts?" Obviously the 'Marauder's Map' was a map, and Dazai could feel the magic charming it

already. Given that Hogwarts was surrounded by nothing but forest, he couldn't imagine what else it might plot out.

George snapped. "Got it in one, Snakey!"

"Take a look!" Fred said, unfolding the paper and laying it flat on the table between Dazai and Hermione. The paper was blank—empty of any trace of ink. But, able to feel the magic in place, Dazai knew there was more to it than the naked eye let on. "But, *uh*, watch yourself, Boss. Wouldn't want to kill the magic in this thing."

Dazai waved a gloved hand in agreement. He leaned forward to get a better view, but was still careful to keep his distance.

Hermione, similarly, sat forward in her seat. "I wasn't aware there were any maps of Hogwarts! With how the stairs are always changing..."

"Hence the charms," George explained. A grin split across his face. "Among other things. Fred, if you'd do the honors..?"

"It would be my pleasure, brother-mine."

Dazai and Hermione both watched with bated breath as Fred withdrew the wand from his cloak. He gave it a dramatic swirl in the air, then tapped it on the blank paper twice. He cleared his throat, then, *"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."*

The second those words left Fred's mouth, Dazai felt the magic around them shift. It felt like a lock sliding into place. A click of the latch. The map seemed to buzz. Just as Dazai was beginning to parse out the sensation, something happened. What was once an empty, yellow sheet of paper was slowly being dyed black. Ink bled out of the page. It drew line after line, slowly and silently forming walls, rooms, corridors. Within ten seconds, a perfect map of Hogwarts covered the page.

Dazai's initial reaction was: *a map. Finally! I've only been asking for an entire year.*

But just as soon as the thought came on, another stole it away. Dazai's eyes widened as he realized—

"Pretty cool, huh?" George asked. A smirk broke across his face.

Beside him, Fred poked a spot on the map. Dazai traced his motion to where the map had drawn out the Hogwarts library. Right beside Fred's finger were five cursive names.

Granger, H.

Weasley, F.

Weasley, G.

Dazai, O.

Pince, I.

“Our names?” Hermione asked. Then, the realization hitting her, Hermione’s head snapped up to meet the twins’ eyes. “This map can track the location of students in Hogwarts?!”

“Not *just* students!”

George titled his chin in the direction of the librarian. “See? Madam Pince’s name is here, too. It tracks everyone.”

Hermione gasped, and Dazai found himself nearly doing the same if not for a practiced self-restraint. The things someone could do with this type of information—

“Of course, it has its downfalls,” George said. “Some rooms aren’t on here—the gang room, for one. If you go in there, we won’t be able to find you.”

“Or all those secret rooms hidden in the third-floor corridor—you remember those, Dazai. And there’s bound to be more rooms like them, only we haven’t found any.”

Well, that explained how the twins were privy to so many secret passages.

Looking down at his name, printed in immaculate script, Dazai had to wonder how the map’s magic worked. It was able to pick up *his* presence—something not so easily done with No Longer Human. As he contemplated, Dazai watched as a trail of unfamiliar and familiar names walked down nearby halls.

With squinted eyes, Dazai searched for... there! It looked like Pansy was in the Slytherin common room chatting with Millie, Tracey, and Blaise.

As for Draco and Ron... a moment of searching revealed nothing. Either they were both in a secret room somewhere, or they were outside. Based on what Hermione had told him earlier, either was a possibility.

“Hey, Boss. You listening?” Fred pouted, pulling Dazai from his musings. “This isn’t nearly the overjoyed and awed reaction I was hoping for.”

Dazai was listening—of course he was. This Marauder’s Map was beyond interesting. More than that, it was *useful*. The twins were right about the significance of being able to track everyone at Hogwarts. Dazai’s head was already spinning with his own uses for such a thing.

But while there was a part of Dazai that was listening, there was another part of Dazai that was scheming, plotting, planning...

(A part of Dazai that thought, somewhere between relieved and guilty, *“it says Dazai, O. not Tsushima, S.”*

He discarded the thought immediately.)

“Where did you get something like this?” Dazai asked instead.

Fred and George looked to one another, then beamed. “Stole it from Filch’s office during our first year. Took a while to figure the secret code out, but once we did?”

“Pretty hard to get caught doing pranks when you know where all the prank-busters are at any given moment!”

Hermione’s smile fell. “The prefects and professors are only doing their jobs.”

“And so are we!”

“It’s true! Dazai basically employed us as mischief makers, you know.”

“You aren’t getting paid,” Hermione deadpanned.

“Not yet!”

Dazai shrugged, smiling over Hermione’s accusatory look. He inspected the map with a serious eye, taking in information like a starving dog to raw meat. “I’m a little jealous,” Dazai hummed, eyes tracking the name *Snape, S.* where it was planted beside *Pomfrey, P*. in the infirmary’s back office. “With a map like this, I’d never get lost again!”

Fred and George laughed. Even Hermione jumped out of her stern glaring to chuckle.

“We’d share it with you, Boss—”

“—but we weren’t sure with your nullification thing..?”

When Dazai nodded, the twins looked relieved—as though they had seriously worried over upsetting Dazai by not sharing the Marauder’s Map sooner. Dazai reassured them quickly. “Unfortunately, it’ll have to stay with you two. This thing is oozing magic. I’d destroy it in a heartbeat.” He paused. “Accidentally, of course.”

“Of course,” Fred said, smirking.

“But!” George perked up. He grabbed the map, rolling it up with one hand before slipping it into his own robes.

Dazai watched it disappear with no small amount of disappointment. He’d have to ask them to let him see it again, later.

George continued, “That’s not the main reason we bring up the map.”

Having seen the Marauder’s Map, now, Dazai immediately pieced everything together. “You know I got into a fight with Pansy because you saw it happen on your map!”

“Right on!” Fred cheered. Looking somewhat guilty, he said, “We *only* saw on the map, though.”

George nodded. “By the time we closed up the map and went to see you in person, the hall was empty.”

Collapsing forward, Fred bemoaned, “what awful bodyguards we make!”

Dazai waved them off. Fred and George weren’t his bodyguards (though he had likened them to guard dogs on a few occasions). Though with how this year was shaping up? Maybe he *should* invest in a bodyguard or two...

No. Dazai disregarded that idea before it could wander too far. Although a bodyguard might be nice, it was impractical. For one: he didn’t need to garner any more attention by having someone follow him around 24/7. And two: Dazai couldn’t trust any of his fellow classmates enough to do the job. Discounting his gang, of course. But...

“You didn’t get hurt, did you?”

“He doesn’t *look* hurt.”

Fred and George were still talking, oblivious to Dazai’s inner turmoil. They looked worried. Anxious. Just like the other day, chatting with Blaise, Dazai was reminded that he wasn’t the only person hurt by the school’s negative opinion of him.

I’m dragging them all down with me, he thought, followed by the more level-headed, *unlike me, these kids don’t know how to navigate high-stress situations.*

As Dazai had been doing since birth—breathing in mafia air and spitting out smiles.

“I'd barely call it a fight—no one even got *close* to mortal peril." He sighed forlornly. "Gemma broke it before anyone was hurt,” Dazai lied. Covered with thick makeup, Dazai’s bruised cheek didn’t betray the truth. He ignored the twins slumping forward with unmistakable relief. Moving on, Dazai told them, “If you want to make it up to me for missing the fight, I have a job for you two.”

Fred and George immediately perked up, looking excited. “A prank?”

“Hold up,” Hermione cut in, “are we just going to gloss over the fact that Dazai was *attacked?!”*

“Yup!” Dazai said, popping the word playfully.

Hermione sputtered.

Fred and George looked torn on who’s side to take. Dazai didn’t give them a chance to decide.

“I’ve decided on out target for our cheating plot.”

The twins *ooh-ed.* Beside them, Hermione’s frown only deepened.

“Who?!”

“I bet it’s Professor Lockhart!”

Dazai laughed. “It is! How'd you guess?”

Fred chuckled. “I knew it. That guy is awful.”

“He’s barely even teaching!”

More than that— “Professor Lockhart despises Dazai,” Hermione explained. “But he’s such a marvelous author! It’s really a shame that he’s fallen for the Daily Prophet’s propaganda...”

“Him and everyone else,” Dazai mumbled. In reality, *‘despises’* wasn’t the right word for how Lockhart felt about him. It was more a situation of Lockhart leveraging Dazai’s bad press for some publicity of his own. But Dazai didn’t see any reason to explain that now. He was handling it just fine on his own.

Hermione glanced his way, then turned to the table. She fiddled with her hands. “I’m still not sure I can support this whole... cheating thing. Against a wonderful author like Lockhart, no less!”

“He may be an author,” George said. Fred finished, “but he’s certainly no teacher!”

Hermione puffed out her cheeks, but didn’t respond.

Dazai took that as his cue to continue. “Lockhart keeps a copy of his test answers on his classroom desk. It’s all marked up in red ink—you can’t miss it. Using that Marauder’s Map of yours, I imagine sneaking in long enough to copy the answers down shouldn’t be difficult for you two. And if you sneak in while I’m in class with Snape on Saturday, you’ll have one less professor to watch out for.”

“Oh! Good idea!”

“After we get the answer key, we start getting paid!” Fred snorted. “See, Hermione? Paid for mischief!”

Instead of rising to the bait, Hermione buried her nose in a book. “I’m not a part of this!”

The twins laughed, teasing smiles on their lips. Dazai joined in.

For the first time since Pansy cornered him, Dazai felt a little more at ease.

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The back office of the infirmary was not a place commonly visited by students. In fact, the majority of kids attending Hogwarts would never even set foot there. Poppy Pomfrey knew this and enforced it well. She couldn’t have students snooping around back there, after all. Between her more potent potions and private student documentation, the area was strictly off-limits.

Poppy was glad to have enforced that No Trespassing rule early on in her career now. No one would ever dare to enter, which made her office a perfect location for clandestine meetings.

The unofficial "Dazai Investigation Club" could meet privately here.

"This spell might do nicely," Poppy said, sliding a thick, ancient tome across the desk. Even doing so carefully, the book's cover tore at even the slightest movement. Old books were always a delicate thing to handle.

Severus looked up from his own book—something a little more modern than Poppy's, but no less dense. As he skimmed the page, his expression didn't shift in the slightest. Poppy waited patiently for a response.

When Severus had first come barging into her office, a stack of tomes in hand, she had been prepared to snap at him about coming in unannounced. But something had stopped her up short. The look on his face had been one of exhaustion. And when the first words out of his mouth were a pleading, "does the No Trespassing rule apply to Gilderoy?" Poppy had caved.

(Lucky for him, she hadn't grown angry with his butting in. Poppy when she was angry was...

Severus shivered at just the thought.)

Instead, she pulled up a second chair beside her desk, took a book, and started reading herself.

"...this could work," he said after a moment. "I've never heard of this spell before..."

Poppy hummed. She left the spell book in the middle of the desk between them, grabbing another book for herself instead. *Magical Cures for Unusual Patients* was full of treatments for werewolves and curse-bearers and even people with a phobia of magic. Perhaps it would have something for those with an incredibly high Magical Sensitivity?

"But I can't be expected to teach Mr. Dazai a spell like this," Severus interrupted her thoughts with a glower. "It might help *him* to know, but *I* won't be able to learn it. How in Merlin's name can I teach the boy a spell I don't know myself?"

Poppy cast him a brief look. "I'll keep looking, but this one seems the most applicable here."

It was true: most spells used a base amount of magic to function. An amount that—if the Sensing Stone's reading was correct—would still be too much for Dazai to safely handle. The best Poppy could come up with at the moment was a spell that used so *little* magic it was barely a spell at all. And that alone had taken hours of pouring through old books to discover.

Because, really, who in the world would want to cast a spell so meager it may as well not exist?

"If you can start him on casting this, he should be able to slowly increase his tolerance, in theory."

Snape huffed. "It's the *'in theory'* part I don't like."

Poppy agreed. But it wasn't often a student came to her with an ailment she couldn't fix. She was trying her best. Speaking of—

A new, unopened letter sat on her desk. It was written over in the sloppy handwriting of a medical professional's apprentice—by the name of Wiggins, apparently—and delivered earlier that day via a particularly bulky brown owl.

A letter from St. Mungo's Hospital inquiring about her patient. The fifth one this week.

Severus followed her gaze to where it had fallen on the letter. "Another one?"

She sighed. "You know I reached out to them after our meeting with Mr. Dazai last week. Unfortunately, I couldn't find a way out of explaining my theory about the boy's Magical Sensitivity level. After hearing that—"

"They became insufferable," Severus guessed, a clear dislike in his tone.

"They want to meet him. Run their own tests on him." She paused, finally forcing her eyes away from the latest missive. "If it were any other student, I wouldn't hesitate to accept their help."

Any other student would also *want* the help. Dazai seemed only mildly interested in his ailment most days.

More than that, of course, was the Daily Prophet.

It had nothing but bad thing to say about Dazai—and although Poppy was privy to the truth behind Quirrell's death, the staff at St. Mungo's were not. The buzz surrounding Dazai's case in particular was intense. There wasn't a soul in the magical community that didn't have thoughts on the boy one way or the other. Poppy couldn't trust St. Mungo's to put their medical practice before their political ones.

Since the Daily Prophet aired their story on Gilderoy's encounter with Dazai, the public's fear had only continued to mount. The whole situation was looking more and more worrying by the day. But Albus' stance continued to be total media silence.

At the very least, Severus was on her side. Otherwise, he wouldn't be sitting here with her, pouring over books for Dazai's sake.

Thinking this, Poppy asked, "How about you? Have any of your letters to Yokohama come back with results?"

Pointedly, Severus kept his eyes locked on his book. "Take a guess."

"Ah..." From how Severus' face pinched and darkened, Poppy was sure she already knew the answer. "I've never met a government more tight-lipped that this Yokohama." And she had dealt with plenty of governments. Digging up medical records for students wasn't always mandatory, but when it was, Poppy turned out all of her resources.

"It's a pain in my ass."

Poppy laughed despite herself. “You’ll manage. Although it is a little odd...”

When she trailed off, Severus looked up. “What?”

“If I didn’t know any better,” Poppy said, thoughtful, “I’d say this Yokohama is its own kind of magical community. They’re about as hard to penetrate as one, anyway.”

Severus paused. His hands hovered over the book.

“How so?”

“Well,” she glanced to her own stack of correspondences. Severus must have twice as many as her by now. Each one as vague and unhelpful as the last. “If a muggle somehow found out about Hogwarts and tried to contact us, the Ministry would send them a letter a bit like that, wouldn’t they?”

Stop asking questions. Stay out of our business. If you keep digging your nose where it doesn’t belong, you’ll find yourself regretting it.

Was that not the Ministry of Magic’s go-to method for diverting muggles, as well? Followed by a particularly nasty memory-erasing spell, of course.

It was an odd thought to cross her mind: that Yokohama and the Ministry of Magic had similar warding-away practices. But once she made the connection, it dug at her. Muggles didn’t have any reason to act so defensively. To see them doing so now was just... odd.

Severus seemed to be following her train of thought, “Trying to research Yokohama, I've found virtually nothing. If you asked me to find out what the *weather* was in Yokohama today, I wouldn’t be able to tell you. I had to use some muggle methods,” he grimaced, “but even those methods revealed nothing about the inner-workings of Yokohama beyond the basics. The same results a muggle would get trying to research Hogwarts. Information gets into the city, but it doesn’t get out.”

Poppy rubbed her chin. “But you’ve been to Yokohama before, haven’t you? If it were anything like Hogwarts, you’d have been turned away long before then.”

“I’ve been a few times, now.” Twice to visit Dazai before the boy’s first year and once to request records, Poppy knew. She had been on the receiving end of a rant regarding each and every one of those visits. “It seemed normal enough to me. I hardly went sight-seeing, but Yokohama appeared to be a normal muggle city even then.”

“I guess that's that, then.”

“Perhaps,” was all Severus replied with. But Poppy could see from how Severu’s brows were furrowed that the potion’s master was still deep in thought.

“Don’t let my wild theories carry you away, Severus,” Poppy chided. “It was merely a thought. Perhaps this Yokohama place just has a stricter government than we are used to.”

Severus glowered. He turned back to his book, and Poppy did the same. “Or perhaps it’s hiding something.”

She hummed. Page after page about magical remedies and cures stared up at her, each useless in their own right. Young Mr. Dazai would be helped by none of this. And although there were spells to temporarily *raise* Magical Sensitivity, no one had ever considered concocting a spell to *lower* it.

“Perhaps that, too,” Poppy said as she flipped the page. “Have you considered asking Mr. Dazai himself? If anyone knows Yokohama, it would be a resident.”

A closed-off community—not so unlike Hogwarts and the Ministry? It was an interesting thought, certainly. But Poppy was a smart woman. She stayed up to date with the news, read each magical medical journal as they came out, and even engaged in a bit of healthy gossip regarding a certain Dark Lord every now and then. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say Poppy knew all there was to know about the modern magical community.

In this world, there existed magic-users and muggles. A third group, living out its secret existence in a random Japanese city?

Absurd. She would have known by now. Magical society was powerful—*they would know by now.* It was impossible.

But then there was Dazai Osamu—a young boy with secrets under his bandages and a Magical Sensitivity the world has never seen. And Yokohama—a city so far out of Hogwarts’ recruiting range it shouldn’t have even crossed Albus’ desk in the first place. A city that acted like it was hiding something and a twelve-year-old child who smiled like he knew a world of information you didn’t. Who had killed someone. Who, for all intents and purposes, should never have been enrolled at Hogwarts at all.

But then there was Dazai Osamu—who was already impossible from the onset.

Severus’s eyes were on his book, but he didn’t appear to be reading it anymore. His mind was elsewhere, a contemplative look shadowing his expression.

Staring into her own book, Poppy wondered if she didn’t look the same.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading and happy birthday to everyone lol!! bit of a shorter chapter before we get on to some bigger plot points

on an unrelated note: i updated the series page yesterday, but ill go ahead and say it again here - i've given blanket permission to translate this fic! thanks to everyone who's been asking permission. go nuts. just! be sure to link back to the original :)

see yall next week!
next up: another remedial magics lesson with snape!

Subtle Movements

Chapter Summary

Dazai, Snape, and learning a new spell.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Severus set the book down with a put-upon sigh.

He'd been attempting to cast the spell written there for over an hour now with no results. No matter how many times he read the passage or waved his wand or wished *really, really hard*—nothing ever happened. In any other situation, Severus would have simply given up by now. As it was, a spell like this was virtually useless.

But Dazai needed to learn it, and Severus was at a loss as to how the boy would teach himself without a guide. Merlin knew the boy couldn't be trusted to do his written assignments, let alone take the time to learn this spell without a guiding hand.

Just as Severus was lamenting the upcoming lesson, the door to his office suddenly swung open.

For a split-second, Severus' heart sunk.

Not Gilderoy barging in again..!

His head snapped up with a glare, ready to chase the author away with a biting word or two. But rather than the loud and flashy form of Gilderoy Lockhart at his door, Severus saw a much smaller visitor instead.

"Don't you know how to knock, boy?"

Dazai waved him off, the ever-present smile on his face teasing. "It's not like you're expecting anyone else right now, are you?"

Unwittingly, Severus' eyes automatically roved up-and-down Dazai's figure in search of injury. A quick once-over, however, revealed nothing of the sort. Just the boy's worrying (but not unexpected) bandage wrappings and those strange gloves he'd started wearing this year. If Dazai had any injuries—self-harm or otherwise—they were covered.

Severus clicked his tongue. "Just because I know you're coming is no excuse to forego manners."

“Right, right. But you already know I’m rude, so there isn’t much point in pretending,” Dazai said, clearly unbothered by the potion master’s smoldering sneer. Any other student would be trembling. As always, Dazai was the furthest thing from being just ‘any other student.’ “What are we doing for this week’s lesson, Professor?”

“We’ll be working on spell-casting today.” Severus felt his eyes narrow. “And watch your tongue.”

“Ah... I’m watching it, Sir.”

Severus severely doubted that.

Mercifully, Dazai didn’t make another impudent remark. Instead, he silently shut the door at his back. Only once the door was closed and they were truly alone, did Dazai whirl back around to face him.

Same teasing expression. Same amused glint in his eyes.

Severus sighed. “Sit,” he instructed, gesturing to the chair across from him at the desk, “the sooner we get started the sooner you get out of my hair.”

Only, Dazai didn’t make any move to sit down. He stayed firmly in place, glancing around the room with two discerning eyes. His eyes flitted from one item to the next, lingering over textbooks, half-finished potions, the analog clock sitting on Severus’ desk... He didn’t appear to be looking for anything in particular. But after a moment, Severus’ assumption was proven wrong when Dazai asked, “I don’t see the Sensing Stone anywhere.”

Severus grunted. “We won’t be using it today. *Sit.”*

An expression flashed across Dazai’s face for a split second—one Severus couldn’t decipher. Then, that cheeky smile was back in its place. Dazai sat down. “Madam Pomfrey doesn’t trust you to take care of it, *huh?”* the boy teased. “Professor Snape’s explosive temperament would destroy it by accident.”

Severus’ brow twitched. Irritation lanced through him. “The next word out of your mouth earns you a detention.”

Dazai opened his mouth, paused, then seemed to think better of it. His mouth snapped shut with a boney *click.*

Good. At least the boy had *some* brain cells still rubbing around in that empty skull of his. Maybe they could make this lesson work, after all.

“The Sensing Stone was gifted to Poppy for medical purposes,” Severus explained. “It will not benefit you to have it present in this lesson. Unless you desire to make up another answer to the simple question of ‘what color do you see?’”

“I wasn’t lying about seeing white,” Dazai said, puffing out his cheeks. “Professor Snape just doesn’t trust me.”

Severus raised a brow.

Abruptly, Dazai’s childish pout fell into a small gape. He raised a hand to cover his mouth. *“Oops...”* he trailed off, looking sheepish. “I don’t suppose you’ll take pity on me and rescind your threat about detention?”

Severus ignored him, earning a scrambling *“hey, don’t just look away like that,”* in return. Rather than rise to the bait, Severus took a moment to clean his desk of papers. When only the spell book they would be using for class remained, he looked back to meet Dazai’s eyes.

For all the boy looked self-effacing, he didn’t seem particularly worried about the detention now looming over him.

Brat.

Severus slid the spell book across the desk, then spun it around so Dazai could read it. “Read the passage titled *Motus Subtilis* while I prepare tea. You will practice casting that spell once you’ve finished.”

“We’re having tea? Just like old times!” Dazai tittered, leaning forward in his seat. His eyes were locked firmly on the book, evidently reading. When Severus didn’t respond for a second except to glare, Dazai glanced up. “Since I already have a detention, it doesn’t matter if I keep talking *now.”*

“Make that two detentions.”

“Why not have it a round third?” Dazai asked, eyes falling back to the book. His eyes moved quickly across the page, but Severus wasn’t sure how much the boy could actually be reading at that speed while simultaneously holding a conversation. “It’s not like I have much else to do... Hey! Maybe you can give me detention during Professor Lockhart’s next class. He’ll hate that!”

Despite himself, Severus’ lips twitched upwards into an unmistakable smile. *Imagining Gilderoy’s pompous, arrogant smirk flattened from the insult*—Severus smothered his grin before Dazai could look up. "No. Go back to reading.”

“I’m reading *and* talking,” Dazai responded petulantly. True to his words, Dazai’s eyes remained firmly locked to the page. “Anyway, if it’s Lockhart we’re talking about..?”

“No,” Snape reiterated. As he spoke, he magicked the tea kettle to his desk and carefully lit a flame under it. A few more quietly murmured spells filled the water and collected the mugs. By then, Dazai had flipped the page. “Regardless, Gilderoy has already made enough complaints about you to me. He seems to take these Remedial Magics lessons as a personal affront to his honor.”

Dazai snorted. “Of course he does. He’s a champion of the people, after all.”

There was a lilting humor to everything Dazai said, as though he were privy to an inside joke Severus was only able to glimpse at. Severus wasn’t sure whether such a blasé attitude should irritate him or not. On one hand, it told him just how little Dazai respected his professors. On the other, Severus had never known a single student to be this unafraid of him.

He wouldn’t go so far as to say it was refreshing. But it *was* curious.

Everything about Dazai Osamu was curious.

Hence why the *Motus Subtilis* spell wasn’t the only topic of conversation planned for today’s lesson.

Severus felt his eyes narrow as he observed the boy reading. Ever since his conversation with Poppy the other day, Severus couldn’t shake the nagging question: just what *is* Yokohama? It was a city—it was Dazai’s home. But there was more to it. Something Yokohama was keeping from the rest of the world. Something only Dazai would know about. Severus intended to ask him about it today, hopefully without alerting the boy’s suspicions too terribly.

Poppy’s half-joking remark about it being similar to their own magical society had only tightened the bind on his chest. It was an absurd claim! But...

Severus remembered a too-brief conversation he’d had with Albus one year prior. A conversation regarding so-called Special Ability users. If a group like that could exist without anyone knowing, could Yokohama be hiding something similar..?

“You look like you’re thinking too hard,” Dazai said. At some point, while Severus was getting lost in thought, Dazai had stopped reading to watch him instead. “I can practically see the smoke coming from your ears, Sir. If you think too hard, your brain will pop like a pipe bomb. You'll get brain matter all over the place.”

Severus’ lip curled.

“Go back to reading.”

Dazai blinked. His expression belied nothing of what he was really thinking. “I’ve finished.”

This time, it was Severus’ turn to blink, dumbfounded.

Although the passage he’d instructed Dazai to read wasn’t particularly long, the text was very dense. It was full of complicated terminology and a vocabulary several levels above that of a twelve-year-old. Severus’ eyes narrowed. “You’ve *skimmed* it,” he surmised, the glower painting his words heavily, “Seeing as you will be performing this spell shortly, simply gleaning information from a paragraph or two will not suffice. Do not test my patience, boy.”

Except, rather than return to the book as Severus excepted, Dazai’s eyes hardened. He held

Severus' gaze. "Why do you always think I'm lying to you, Sir?" Dazai bore the word 'sir' as though it were an insult. Maybe to him it was.

"You can't possibly have finished reading that already," Severus snapped back. Annoyance prickled his skin. "Take your time and read it properly, or I'll work out a punishment worse than detention for you."

Clearly, the threat of detention had lost its power over Dazai. He'd need something more threatening. Perhaps something to do with Gildeory. If Dazai's words were anything to go by, he didn't like the flashy man any more than Severus did.

But, again, Dazai didn't look told-off in the slightest.

Instead, he crossed his arms over his chest, eyes still locked on Severus' own. Then, with the upmost confidence, he recited, *"Motus Subtilis is one of the most precise and arduous spells for the average magic-caster to use due to the infinitesimal requirement for latent magic manipulation. The induction of more than a minute amount of magic renders this spell obsolete. As such, the casting of Motus Subtilis is more practical as an impetus for magical exploration or personal enhancement rather than as an in-field resource..."* Dazai trailed off, sounding bored. Not once had he looked back at the book. "Need I continue, Sir?"

Severus stared. His mouth dropped open without his permission.

Dazai had not only just told him the book's contents, but had *recited* it. Word for word.

How..?

"How did you do that?" Severus asked. He pulled to book to himself checking that—yes. Word for word, exactly. It wasn't possible that Dazai had memorized the first paragraph after only reading it once. He must have been peeking at it, somehow. Only—Severus knew that wasn't the case. He had seen with his own two eyes.

Dazai shrugged, as if he hadn't just done something incredible. "It's like I told you: I've finished reading it."

"That's not..." for once, Severus' ever-present scowl failed him. Bewilderment had taken its place in his voice. "Have you read this book before?"

"No." Dazai's nose scrunched up in a way that Severus thought was offended. "What use would I have for a spell book when I can't spell cast?"

Severus' eye twitched. "Do not play coy with me." He leveled Dazai with a severe stare. "You recited the book's contents to me exactly."

"What? Did you want me to get a few words wrong?" Dazai asked. This time Severus was *certain* the boy was insulted. As if the feat he'd just performed was not only typical, but expected of him.

Severus opened his mouth, then closed it.

In the end, words failed him.

The scream of steam saved Severus from having to respond. He extinguished the flame with a wave of magic, silencing the kettle. As he poured the steaming water into the two mugs, Severus turned a thoughtful eye onto Dazai.

The boy was no longer watching him. Instead, he had turned his gaze to the office around them, eyes once again flicking from one item to the next. Dazai must not have found whatever he was looking for, because he huffed loudly and slumped back into his seat.

Since they had first met, Severus had the sense that Dazai was smart—it was something about his sly smiles and how the lights twinkled in his eyes when he was amused. And though some part of Severus had always held onto that belief, he had quickly squashed it down after seeing Dazai's grades. Within three weeks of class, Dazai had gone from an A, to a C, then an F. He never did assignments and rarely completed tests. In fact, Severus was certain the only reason Dazai had passed his first year at all was because of the whole fiasco with Quirrell.

But this...

Severus poured a helping of honey into Dazai's mug before sliding it across the desk. It was the same snake-skin pattered one he'd given the boy last year.

Dazai's eyes snapped straight to it from where they'd been drilling into the clock on Severus' desk. He took it without hesitation. "Thanks, Sir." Steam billowed up around his face.

Severus nodded, silently fixing his own cup the way he preferred it. He met Dazai's eyes across the desk. "Can every student in Yokohama memorize texts so quickly?"

"Only the well-behaved ones," Dazai said, blowing over his tea.

Severus bit back a snappish response. Dazai Osamu was *anything* but well-behaved. Judging by the smirk Dazai was hiding beneath his mug, the boy was well aware of this fact. Before Severus could chastise him for it, however, Dazai was speaking.

"That clock is broken."

Severus followed his student's gaze to his desk. The analog clock sitting there was small and made of a dark wood. Just as Dazai had noted, however, its hands didn't tick forward at all. They stayed stubbornly put at exactly the twelve mark. Severus turned it so Dazai could better see its face.

"This clock will serve as your lesson for today."

At that, Dazai sat up a little straighter, clearly interested. He stared at the clock for a few lingering seconds before shaking his head. "How's that? It's just a broken clock."

“You’ve read the chapter on *Motus Subtilis.”* And then some, evidently. “Tell me, what does the spell do?”

Dazai frowned at him, clearly still upset with Severus’ earlier disbelief. *“Motus Subtilis is a catalyst for incredibly minute alterations to—”*

“Stop.” Severus raised a hand, stopping Dazai in his tracks. “Tell me in your own words. If you’re just going to spit back to me what the book says, you won’t benefit from this lesson at all.”

Dazai paused, mouth still hung ajar. For a second, it looked as though his entire being were buffering, unsure of what step he was meant to take next. A small furrow pinched between his brows.

Slowly, Dazai answered, “it’s a spell for moving things only a very, very small amount. Fractions of fractions.”

Again, Dazai paused. But Severus could tell from how his eyes drifted away in thought that Dazai hadn’t finished yet. He was merely trying to find the right words.

Severus took a sip from his tea while Dazai thought.

“It’s used for movements so minor, you wouldn’t even notice if you weren’t staring directly at the subject. Precise, exact movements—like in a surgery.” He tapped a finger along the rim of his mug. “You don’t want to be moving the scalpel over an entire centimeter, but only a fraction of that. It barely takes any energy to move the scalpel over such a small amount, but if you aren’t hyper-focused on the movement of your hand, you’ll wind up stabbing something you didn’t mean to. Killing the patient and getting blood everywhere is such a mess,” Dazai said at last, eyes bright when he looked to Severus for approval.

Severus blinked—that was certainly one way to understand the *Motus Subtilis* spell. Though, when he thought about it, it was not an unusual way for a *muggle-born* to understand magic. He’d found a way to relate the nearly unheard-of spell to muggle practices. Severus was almost impressed, especially considering that he himself had struggled to imagine any practical comparisons for a spell like this. That, and...

“Your father is a doctor, isn’t he?”

Dazai nodded easily, but Severus didn’t miss the way his eyes briefly tightened. “He’s done plenty of surgeries before... this spell is a little like that, then?”

Severus considered that for a second. Then, “It is an apt comparison. Although, *Motus Subtilis* sees less practical use.”

“Right,” Dazai agreed. He seemed to be on a roll, now. “Since you lot have healing spells, I guess surgical spells wouldn’t do much good. So it’s just for practicing magical control?”

“In this case, we’ll be using it to manage your Magical Sensitivity levels.”

Now, it was Dazai’s turn to stop and think. He glanced at the clock again, but whatever the boy was thinking he didn’t voice aloud.

Severus cleared his throat, drawing Dazai’s attention back to him. “Poppy’s current theory is that by having you practice a spell like *Motus Subtilis*—one requiring so minute an amount of magic—your body might slowly acclimate to greater amounts in future lessons.”

Dazai nodded in understanding.

“In the past, spell-casting for you has been akin to going from zero to one-hundred in a second flat. As this spell requires a nearly unnoticeable amount of magic to function, it will hopefully not shock your system so terribly.” Severus paused, trying to get a judge on Dazai’s expression. He had seen the boy ill and passed out after casting in the past. A spell this minor probably wouldn’t have the same effect, but he couldn’t be sure. The uncertainty twisted in Severus’ gut.

“You don’t sound very confident, Sir,” Dazai commented. He took a sip from his tea.

A second after, Severus took a sip as well. It warmed him from the inside-out. “This is merely a test. Seeing as I have never taught someone with your condition before, we can’t be certain if this method will work. If for even a second, you feel light-headed or unwell, stop casting *immediately*. Am I clear?”

“Professor Snape is awfully fussy today—”

“Am I *clear?”*

Dazai blinked several times, surprise written across his face. He visibly collected himself. “Crystal clear, Sir.”

Severus let out a breath. “Good.”

“What’s the clock for, then?” Dazai asked, quickly pushing forward. “I guess I’m supposed to be using *Motus Subtilis* on it somehow.”

Severus watched him for a second. He sighed. “For today’s lesson, you’ll be using the *Motus Subtilis* spell to move the seconds hand forward one tick.”

Dazai’s eyes widened minutely and he leaned forward in his seat to inspect the broken clock.

Severus had specifically chosen a clock for this lesson. If Dazai was able to perform the spell correctly, he would have a clear metric of the boy’s progress. One second forward on the clock would indicate one successful casting, and so on.

Although Severus didn’t expect Dazai to successfully cast the spell in only one lesson. Dazai was up against a significant hurdle, and it wasn’t something he would be able to overcome in

one class period. But hopefully, after a few more weeks of practice, he might be able to cast *Motus Subtilis* once or twice.

It didn't help that Severus himself was unable to cast a spell this subtle.

"Only one tick?"

Severus snapped away from his thoughts. "This spell is incapable of movements greater than that. *Motus Subtilis* uses an amount of magic so small, it cannot move items even an inch."

Dazai hummed. He took a long sip from his tea before setting it down on the desk. Severus watched as Dazai retrieved a wand from his cloak and gave it a few testing swishes. Evidently, the boy was eager to get straight into the lesson.

"The book didn't mention any particular wand movement," Dazai said, giving his wrist a flick. But, seeing as Dazai had not uttered any spell, no magic swirled to life at the other end of his wand.

Severus grunted. That was another problem. "No. And this spell is far too old and entirely out of practice in modern times for me to find the correct one. For now, try whatever motion feels most natural." With any luck, Severus' next visit to the library would uncover a more detailed account of *Motus Subtilis'* casting methods.

"Most natural, *huh..?"* Dazai muttered. Testing, he gave his wand a few flicks, then a couple wide swishes. He rolled his wrist, traded wand-hands, then traded back. A few minutes passed in near silence while Dazai decided on a proper wand motion. "Okay," he said, turning to Severus with a beam, "I think I've got it."

"Then start practicing," Severus told him. Even though his expectations were suitably low, the potion master couldn't help the interested buzz in his chest. None of this excitement show through in his tone, however. "I haven't got all day. Remember what I said about feeling ill."

-

Dazai twirled the wand in his hand. With his gloves on, the wood felt perfectly smooth and groove-less. He gave it a squeeze.

What was the most natural way to hold a wand? Dazai had no idea. In his opinion, everything about having a wand felt unnatural to begin with. He much preferred the feeling of cold steel under his palm to the warm, buzzing wood of a wand. The *click* of pistol's hammer to the half-mumbled incantation of a spell.

Though Dazai had spent a decent chunk of the previous year fruitlessly twirling his wand around, it had never felt very comfortable in his grip. Instead, it had felt useless. Dazai didn't like useless things.

Speaking of useless things—Dazai lifted the tea mug to his mouth. The sweet tang of honey lingered on his tongue.

“Remember what I said about feeling ill,” Snape was saying, serious gaze locking onto Dazai.

For a second, Dazai considered telling his professor, ‘the second I start casting, I’ll feel sick,’ but decided against it. Snape was already being too fussy about his so-called condition. Dazai didn’t need him rushing to find Madam Pomfrey every time he so much has lifted his wand.

“I’ll be sure to stop,” Dazai said instead. And he *would* stop. Eventually. After a few dozen tries or so, maybe.

Snape watched him for a long second, before finally nodding. Evidently, he hadn’t read the lie in Dazai’s words.

With permission given, Dazai turned his full attention onto Snape’s broken clock. Despite all the time that had passed during their meeting, it had still yet to tick forward even one second. Now knowing what today’s lesson was, Dazai understood why. *He* was going to have to be the impetus for its ticking.

He narrowed his eyes at it, then readied his wand.

One spell of *Motus Subtilis* should move the second hand forward one tick. That was it. Nothing greater than that. It was simple enough. And though Dazai could just lean forward and push the clock with his finger, that rather defeated the purpose of this lesson.

Now, Dazai just needed to focus.

But...

Focus on his wand, or focus on the clock’s second hand? Or on the feeling of magic buzzing around them in the air?

Although, based on what he’d learned with the Sensing Stone last week? Dazai wasn’t sure he was even *supposed* to be feeling all the latent magic around them. He’d thought, briefly, to ask Snape about it, but had quickly decided against it. The last thing he wanted was Snape giving him one of those wide-eyed looks again.

“Anytime now, Problem Child.”

Dazai sniffed. “I’m thinking.”

He didn’t turn to see Snape’s expression, but Dazai was sure the man was rolling his eyes. No matter—Dazai was focusing now.

Focusing on..?

Dazai drew in a breath. It cooled his throat and calmed his mostly nonexistent nerves.

The magic in the air swirled, but Dazai ignored it. Dazai settled his focus on the point of his wand. For a spell as precise as this, precise wand movements must be critical. Holding his wand steady, Dazai gave it the slightest of flicks.

"Motus Subtilis," he whispered.

He perked up, watching—

Nothing.

The clock stayed resolutely silent; fingers still stuck at the noon mark.

Dazai frowned, eyes falling to his wand to glare at it.

"Try again."

Dazai turned his glare onto Snape, who was watching him with expectant eyes. "Don't you have any tips?"

Snape raised a brow, but didn't comment on the insolent remark for once. "Unfortunately, I suspect only an individual with Magical Sensitivity as high as yours will be able to cast this spell."

Dazai blinked, momentarily startled out of his glower. "You can't cast it?" He asked, somewhat surprised.

Reading the textbook, Dazai hadn't gleaned that *Motus Subtilis* was impossible. The book had described it as being difficult, but not out of the realm of possibility. In fact, Dazai got the feeling that *Motus Subtilis* was a spell anyone could do if they wanted to really hone their magic. Though, now that Dazai thought about it, Snape had suggested the spell wasn't really used anymore. Perhaps knowledge of *Motus Subtilis* had faded alongside its popularity.

"Huh. Guess I'll have to do all the work for the two of us, then."

Snape sighed. He sounded deeply burdened (Dazai doubted his cheeky grin was helping matters much). Still. It was an interesting tidbit to know Snape expected him to learn a supposedly unlearnable spell.

Again, Dazai raised his wand. This time, he settled his focus on the clock and gave his wand a long, dramatic swish. It cut through the air with a fwhip!

"Motus Subtilis!"

A second passed, the clock's hand did not.

"Damn," Dazai puffed. Something turned in his stomach.

“Language.”

Dazai cast his teacher a sideways glance before turning back to the clock.

He tried another, now half-hearted, cast. Again: nothing. Clearly, he was going about this wrong. This wasn’t working. And though No Longer Human kept periodically buzzing at him, none of the magic around them was reacting to Dazai’s call.

He tapped his fingers along the wand’s edge, thoughtful.

I’ve spell cast in the past. What helped then?

“Perhaps,” Snape drawled, “if you spent more time *casting* and less time *thinking about casting,* you might make some actual progress.”

Dazai, though mostly ignoring his professor now, automatically replied, “It’s only because you won’t give me an example that I have to keep stopping like this.”

Oh. Dazai blinked. *That’s it.*

Across the desk, Snape bristled.

Dazai’s lips turned downward, and contemplation narrowed his eyes.

In the past, Dazai knew he didn’t learn spells in the traditional manner. Other students would listen to their instructors describe proper casting etiquette, then practice themselves. Within a few hours of trying, they could usually cast a given spell well enough.

For Dazai, however, he’d always had an example.

No—he'd *needed* an example.

Because it wasn’t about how to hold a wand or pronounce the words that he needed help with. He had plenty steady hands and a decent grasp over multiple languages already. What Dazai needed was to *feel* the spell.

Incendio felt like a *snap*. *Wingardium Leviosa* was wavy. *Verdimilious* felt quivering.

Once Dazai was able to envision what the magic felt like, he’d been able to cast it. Admittedly followed by several hours' worth of headaches and throwing up. But that was beside the point.

Dazai hummed as he realized the problem: he didn’t know what *Motus Subtilis* was supposed to feel like.

And without Snape to give an example, Dazai wasn’t really sure where to start.

How was the magic supposed to react? What shape should he push and pull the magic into?

Dazai set his wand down and closed his eyes in thought. *Motus Subtilis* was a bit like *Wingardium Leviosia*, wasn't it? Only on a much smaller scale. So it should feel wavy, but more controlled...

"Mr. Dazai," Snape's growling voice cut in, "need I remind you that this lesson only includes the two of us. Ducking behind your desk and napping will not go unnoticed."

"I'm thinking," Dazai repeated.

Snape was silent for a second, then, "I haven't all day to be humoring you."

"No, but you have until four."

Fluttery and wavy... no that's too unbalanced. A spell like this needs to be more exact...

"I don't know what classes are like in Yokohama, but typically it is the *professor* who does the ordering around," Snape said. Dazai was barely listening. "Do not presume to know my schedule. I can't imagine teachers in any community are any more accepting of such an attitude as yours."

"I wouldn't know," Dazai said off-hand, still trying to form the spell in his head. *A bit more strict, a hint less loose...* "I was home schooled. Mori thinks it's cute when I boss him around."

"...I see. I suppose a doctor would make for a good teacher."

"Sure. When he's not busy stitching those idiots up after they get themselves shot."

"Shot..." Snape mumbled to himself. Then, "Does Yokohama have a lot of crime?"

The question momentarily startled Dazai out of his concentration. He blinked up at Snape.

Crime in Yokohama..?

Dazai couldn't help it: he burst out laughing.

Snape went rigid. He stared at Dazai with wide-eyes, clearly not having expected such a raucous reaction to an otherwise benign question. His mouth bobbled open and closed, evidently unsure what to say next. After a moment, his mouth snapped shut and Snape said nothing at all. Dazai chortled.

Good. Couldn't he see Dazai needed to focus, here?

It took several seconds, but eventually the last dregs of laughter finally stopped shaking him. Dazai let out an amused and winded breath.

Right. That was enough laughing about. It was time to focus, now.

Dazai let his eyes slip closed once more.

He almost had the feeling of a spell like *Motus Subtilis* figured out. Now he just needed to make it real.

A more controlled *Wingardium Leviosa.* Exact and precise. Like a needle-point pricking through the air and piercing its target. Edging forward only one tick. An atom shifting just a little to the left. Mori's scalpel. Dazai turned his focus inward, feeling how something heavy settled in his stomach.

Eyes closed and hands flat across his lap, Dazai muttered, *"Motus Subtilis."*

...

Tick.

Dazai's eyes flew open. Across the desk, Snape seemed to have half-jumped out of his seat.

The clock's smallest hand had braved forward one second.

"Oh. I did it," Dazai hummed, pleased.

So *that* was what *Motus Subtilis* was meant to feel like. Dazai supposed that having an example would have sped up the process, but overall, this wasn't an unsuccessful lesson. In the end, he'd been able to engineer a magical signature that worked. Internally, Dazai committed the feeling of *Motus Subtilis* to memory.

Interestingly, Dazai noted, he didn't feel especially sick after casting. Snape was right: *Motus Subtilis* used such a minuscule amount of magic, his body was barely reacting to it. No Longer Human barely had anything to even nullify. He flexed his hands in his lap, feeling well enough to try again.

"Motus Subtilis."

...

Tick.

He'd done it again!

Triumph lit a smile on Dazai's face. He'd never cast a spell this easy before. *Wingardium Leviosa* had taken him weeks to figure out. Not only was *Motus Subtilis* easy to learn, but it also didn't leave him making puddles of sick all over the floor.

Dazai cast the spell again, and smiled wider when it didn't give him a headache.

He whirled on Snape. “Do I get a passing grade, Professor?”

Snape was staring at him, mouth agape.

His eyes flicked rapidly from Dazai to the clock, then back again. The shock was written clearly across his face, and Dazai’s good mood immediately diminished.

“You—” Snape stop-started. “You cast it.”

Dazai’s smile flattened. “You told me to.”

“But it...” he trailed off. There was wonderment in Snape’s voice when he said, “No one has cast that spell for hundreds of years.”

Dazai took that in with a frown.

Suddenly, it occurred to him why Snape’s reaction was so flabbergasted: he hadn’t expected Dazai to learn this spell at all. Eventually, maybe. But not without significant practice and *certainly* not within the first few tries.

Well... Dazai could work with that.

He’d worried for a second that Snape had seen something in his casting—evidence of No Longer Human. But the man was just surprised Dazai was a good student, and that was less *worrying* than it was *amusing*.

“Motus Subtilis,” Dazai said, casting the spell again. He felt the spell take shape somewhere in his skull. A second later, the clock ticked ahead.

Ow—he'd felt that one. Dazai’s head ached dully for a few seconds before fading into nothing.

“You aren’t using your wand,” Snape commented dumbly. Evidently, he was still too shocked to bother putting the usual grimace into each of his words.

Dazai turned his whole body to Snape, and the invisible thread of focus between him and the broken clock snapped apart. Wide eyes met his. “Well, the book didn’t mention a wand at all. Maybe it just doesn’t need one.”

The truth was, Dazai was better able to focus on the feel of the spell when he wasn’t also focusing on the hold of his wand. He wasn’t sure what Snape would make of that, however, and wisely didn’t say so.

“Every spell needs a wand.”

“You can’t even cast it. What do you know?”

Snape froze. The mug he’d raised to his lips a second ago came to a stuttering stop.

Then, his typical scowl overtook his features. Dazai's insolence had finally shocked the man out of his stupor.

Before Snape could lash out at him, Dazai whipped back to the clock. He settled the feeling of a certain spell in his thoughts, then cast, *"Motus Subtilis."*

...

Tick.

Pain bit at his skull. Dazai winced without really meaning to, but the pain was gone within a few seconds.

Snape's sneering expression sobered up instantly.

Clack!

Dazai flinched. His eyes snapped off of the clock, searching wildly for where Snape had slammed his mug into the desk. His heart skipped a nervous beat he fought to calm down.

"Don't."

Snape stared at Dazai for a long moment. His eyes narrowed as he looked Dazai over, clearly searching for something in his student's appearance. But any of the pain Dazai had felt seconds before had since been washed out almost instantly. All Snape would find now was a wide-eyed, slightly rattled stare.

"It's hurting you. Don't cast again," Snape repeated, voice noticeably tight.

Dazai rolled his shoulders, physically shrugging off a lingering agitation. "I barely felt it," he said.

"Any amount of hurt is unacceptable." Snape looked like he had something he wanted to say. But his tone was unchanged when he said, "Spellcasting should not hurt at all."

"I won't improve if I don't push myself," Dazai reasoned. As far as he knew, that was the only way to improve his magic. If Dazai hadn't practiced *incendio* over and over again with the Loyalty Club last year, he wouldn't be able to cast it at all now. No matter all the headaches and nausea along the way.

Snape sniffed. "That may be the case."

Dazai preened.

Before he could start boasting, however, Snape continued, "But it is important to be aware of what limits you aim to push. I don't need you throwing up in my office, Problem Child."

“I wouldn’t do that.” Dazai shifted in his seat. Then, he reached for his tea. It warmed his hands and soothed everything else. “Not on purpose.”

Snape sighed.

“Tell me how it hurts.”

Dazai blinked at the non-sequitur. He raised a brow in question.

“During your last class with Poppy, we focused on a theoretical *why* does it hurt,” Snape explained each word slowly. Dazai frowned. He got the feeling Snape was just trying to stall him on casting Motus Subtilis again. “Tell me *where* it hurts. *How.”*

“It doesn’t hurt, right now,” Dazai said, unamused. At Snape’s disbelieving look, he clarified, “my head only hurt for a second. I can keep casting now.”

“Don’t push it.”

I’m not, Dazai wanted to bite back. He knew his limits—had met them and pushed past them a dozen times over until he was curled on the floor begging for death.

Dazai shook his head to clear the thought.

“Headache and nausea, then.” Snape seemed to be talking to himself now, but he still kept a close eye on his student. He thoughtfully knocked a finger against his cup. *“Hmm...”* He trailed off.

Dazai watched him, waiting for the potion master to continue. When he didn’t, Dazai set his cup down with a loud *clink.*

Snape’s eyes snapped to the sound, then to Dazai’s expectant face. He cleared his throat. “We will be halting our lesson here for today. Your homework for the week is to practice *Motus Subtilis*.” Dazai noted that there was no small amount of shock still in Snape’s voice as he said the spell’s name. Like he still didn’t fully believe Dazai had managed to cast it. *“In moderation,”* he emphasized. “And preferably with one of your friends to supervise you. I don’t want to hear you’ve landed yourself in the infirmary because of this, boy.”

“That’s it?” Dazai asked before he could stop himself.

Snape levelled him with an unimpressed stare. “I told you at the beginning of class we would be stopping the second you began to feel unwell. Even if it was only for a second. Until Poppy and I know more about your condition, we will be treating it with the utmost caution.”

Dazai frowned, eyes falling to the desk. His tea sat there, cooling. It was only just over half-finished.

Snape misread his expression as self-pitying. “Be glad I’m not giving you a writing assignment. Merlin knows you wouldn’t complete any homework, anyway.”

Dazai snorted. “I’d do homework if it were more interesting.”

Something contemplative shifted in Snape’s expression. It lasted for only a few seconds.

Then, he heaved out a sigh. “You brought your textbook with you, didn’t you?” When Dazai nodded, he instructed, “Read it for the rest of class. If you get bored with that, you can re-read the section on *Motus Subtilis.* But under no circumstances are you to cast it again.”

Ah... Dazai had already finished reading his textbook. It had been interesting, but there wouldn’t be any merit to reading it *again*.

“You just want me to stop talking,” Dazai said astutely.

Snape grunted, but didn’t confirm one way or the other. Dazai snorted.

Despite his internal complaints, Dazai retrieved his textbook and obediently flipped to a random page in the middle. He *could* make more of a fuss, or even leave the room out of sheer boredom. But classes weren’t the only reason Dazai was wanting to stay glued to Snape’s side right now.

On the other side of campus in Lockhart’s classroom, the Hell’s Hounds gang was busy enacting their first official heist of the year.

The least Dazai could do was to distract Professor Snape while they worked.

Turning to his book, he—

Magic hissed suddenly at the edge of Dazai's awareness.

He nearly jumped out of his seat, eyes frantically searching for the source.

What was—?!

“Go back to reading.”

Dazai tore his eyes away from where they had settled on the back wall. “Sorry,” he said, guilty.

Snape’s expression was entirely nonplussed.

“Ah... I’m reading, I’m reading.”

Dazai’s gaze fell back to his book, but the words blurred out of focus beneath him. His attention was elsewhere, still hovering on the strange magic he’d felt a moment ago.

For just a second, Dazai had thought he’d felt a powerful magical signature slithering within

the school's walls. He couldn't quite pinpoint it—something *large* and *magical* and *ancient*. A wave of magic coursing through the plumbing before it just as abruptly vanished.

Odd, Dazai thought.

He shook himself, noisily flipping a page. He forced himself to ignore the unease suddenly boiling in his veins.

No odder than anything else at Hogwarts.

-

Knock, knock, knock!

Fred rapped thrice, then leaned into the door close enough to call quietly through the crack, "You almost done in there?"

The sound of a scratching quill filled in a brief silence. Then, "Only a few questions left to copy down," George said back, voice no more than a whisper. "Lockhart sure is wordy..."

Fred sniffed, amusement tickling through his veins.

He looked down the hall in both directions. Only once he was sure they were alone did Fred unravel the Marauder's Map. A few muttered words and the map came to life under his hands.

A complete map of Hogwarts stared back up at him. Fred started his once-over by Lockhart's classroom.

As expected, the hall was perfectly empty of students and staff alike. Fred's eyes settled on his own name: standing guard at the doorway to Lockhart's room. A few feet behind him, George's name was written by Lockhart's desk. His twin was hard at work stealing test answers while Fred himself stood close guard.

Fred scanned the map for another set of familiar names.

And... There they were!

Little Ronniekins really *was* stationed at the end of the hall, just around the corner's bend. Fred felt his lips twitch upwards at the observation. When he had asked Ron for help earlier, he had been awfully hesitant to get involved. For how much Ron had huffed and puffed about not being included in any risky schemes, he sure was taking his role seriously.

At the other end of the corridor, a neatly printed *Zabini, B.* stood guard as well.

That one was less of a surprise. For all Fred had only known Blaise for only a short while, he

knew the second-year was dependable. He seemed like the type to care not very much about most things. But when he found something he *did* care about? Blaise put his all into it. Hence why his name was now a stony statue on the corner of Fred's map.

Well on the other end of the map, Fred saw Dazai's name right next to Professor Snape's in the potion master's office. Just like he said he'd be. Still in lesson, then...

No matter. Dazai may not have been physically present for today's heist, but he was still just as involved in the planning for it. Fred looked forward to catching up with the boss after everything was finished. There was nothing sillier than getting the whole gang together for a prank like this, after all!

With two loyal guard-dogs keeping watch and Fred at the map, he didn't doubt they would make a clean getaway. Now all they needed was—

"Got it!" George sang. He popped his head out of the door, beaming widely. Immediately, an identical smile appeared on Fred's face. As he shut the door, George waved a paper in the air. It had all the frantic writing of a hastily-written cheat sheet across it.

Fred whispered a spell to lock the room behind them. It was locked when they arrived, so it would be locked when they left. A clean entry and exit meant none the wiser!

"Looking good, brother mine!"

George's smirk was blinding as he tucked the paper safely away into his cloak. "What say you we tell the kids that we're all finished here?"

"Sounds delightful," Fred said, already rolling the Marauder's Map closed once more. They were well in the clear now. "I'll grab Blaise, you grab Ron?"

George hummed, already on the same page as his twin brother. "Then we rendezvous at the Hound's office after Boss' lesson finishes!"

Fred tittered out a laugh as he spun on his heel towards where Blaise was stationed. He knew George was doing the same for Ron. Between the two of them, words didn't always need to be shared. It came with the territory of twinhood, Fred supposed.

Certain that his twin would get the job done with Ron, Fred skipped happily down the hall to where Blaise was stationed.

He turned the corner and saw that Blaise was still exactly where he'd been on the map moments before. *Like a statue,* Fred had thought.

Blaise had his arms crossed over his chest where he leaned against the wall and a bored expression pasted across his face. Though Blaise looked duly focused on his surroundings, something about him made Fred think he was actually deep in thought. He stared straight ahead, unblinking.

'Like a statue' is right, Fred chuckled to himself. *This kid is way too serious.*

"Something on your mind, Blaise?"

Blaise's eyes slid towards him. He didn't startle—so maybe *deep in thought* wasn't so accurate, after all.

Still, the ever-so-subtle pinch to Blaise's brow vanished. "I take it you've finished."

Fred snorted. "All done!" kicking the smile on his face even wider, Fred slung an arm over Blaise's shoulder. When he stepped forward, Blaise obediently let himself be walked along. "Now all we have to do is sell. You wouldn't happen to know anyone willing to buy test answers, would you?"

"Just about anyone," Blaise answered sagely. "Moreso for Professor Lockart's tests, considering almost no one wants to read his books. Or listen to him during class."

Again, Fred laughed. Boy, did he know it! Lockhart would talk and talk for hours, but say nothing of worth. Nothing about dark magic or magic for pranks or where he hides his valuables in the classroom...

Ah. He was getting off track.

The point was: Lockhart only ever talked about himself, so his lessons were less *lessons* and more *self-aggrandizing.* He also had a number of unsavory things to say about Dazai. Fred walked out of every Defense class with a sour taste in his mouth and a bitter, protective anger filling up his chest.

"Well, I know *I'll* be gladly using our cheat-sheet to pass the test!" Fred chuckled, forcing himself to focus on the present. "What about you, Blaise? You don't have any hesitance about cheating, do you?"

Blaise raised a brow. "One less class to study for," he said, matter-of-fact.

Fred nodded, as though that were a very wise thing to say. "Ron, too. I think Hermione is the only one dead-set on making her own grade."

It was silent for a second. Fred didn't mind—Blaise seemed like the quiet type, to him. Fred carted Blaise by the shoulder while the shorter boy gathered his thoughts.

"I don't think Dazai was planning to cheat."

Fred blinked. "No?" He asked, surprise flickering across his face. "But this whole thing was his idea. He's not even going to reap the rewards, huh?"

Their boss was really an enigma, sometimes.

Blaise made a face. "I don't think a good grade is much of a reward for Dazai."

Fred paused. The weight of an exceptionally expensive cufflink bore down on his wrist. “And not the money either.”

An enigma with a lot of money, to boot.

“As long as Professor Lockhart is the victim, I think Dazai will consider this a success.” Blaise tilted his head, the motion pulling him slightly out of Fred’s hold. Fred let him draw away without complaint. “I’m heading to the office early to wait for Dazai. I’ll see you then?”

It would still be a little while before Dazai’s class was finished.

“I’ll tag along!” Fred said with a friendly smile. “On the way, you can tell me *all* about all the prospective customers you’ve got lined up for us! At fifty sickles per customer...”

He trailed off, mentally clocking the math of just how much the Hell’s Hounds stood to make.

Blaise stared at him for a second, before a small, amused smile filtered across his features. “It’s a lot,” he said. “Almost all of the second-years I’ve spoken to are interested. And that’s just Slytherin alone.”

As they walked through the halls, Blaise proceeded to list off customer, after customer, after customer. Fred’s amusement turned into surprise, then outright awe.

If they really stood to make *that much money...*

Fred snickered.

Mom was going to *hate* all the new pranks George and he could afford with such a big bank.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading and commenting! all your nice comments really make my day :)
couple quick notes, while i have everyone:
1) i made the motus subtilis spell up,
2) having some formatting issues and can't properly center the line breaks? idk. this doesn't effect readability but it is driving me nuts so. lmao,
3) happy birthday lol

next up: dazai continues his hobby of getting involved in every major incident at hogwarts

Cat's Cradle

Chapter Summary

Dazai discovers a crime scene.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dazai leaned against the wall beside the library entrance, arms crossed over his chest and glaring at anyone who passed by. It wasn't unprovoked—for the last ten minutes, anyone who saw him would either stare daggers into him or squeak and hurry away. Dazai was just glad no one had yet to start another fight with him.

He sighed, giving a group of chittering fourth-years a heavy stare. Dazai recognized a couple of them from Pansy's group the other day. They jumped. Going silent, they hastily scampered away.

Good.

"I apologize for my tardiness, Dazai. I only got a little distracted and wandered off."

Dazai blinked out of his glare. He turned, softening his expression when his eyes met the ditzy smile of Luna Lovegood.

"Did you know there's a secret passageway behind the painting of Elizabeth Burke? The one down in the dungeons. Only, when I asked to be let through, she said I'd have to get a Slytherin's permission, first," Luna rambled. "She said she'd only let a pure-blood through—I am one, you know. Although it's an awful practice to keep, picking and choosing like that. Either way—she said she'd only allow a *Slytherin* pure-blood to pass through. I suppose that means you can't enter. Everyone says you're a muggleborn. And—"

"Luna." Dazai raised a hand, halting her tirade before it could wander too far. "It's fine that you were late. Don't worry about it."

Luna blinked slowly. Then, she offered a small, pleased-looking smile. "Of course."

With that out of the way, Dazai was finally able to ask, "You said you had a copy of the Quibbler for me?"

She bounced. The flighty movement immediately drew Dazai's attentions to the heavy-looking bag wrapped over her shoulder. It tugged and swayed when she did. The bag was rough and clearly well-used. When Luna reached into it to grab something, Dazai realized

why: it was stuffed to the brim and then some with papers. Stacks and stacks of tabloid articles filled the tote.

Dazai watched Luna struggle to pull out the right paper for nearly a minute before finally giving in.

“Let’s sit down,” he said, voice tight. He pointed to the library over his shoulder.

Luna tilted her head. The faraway look in her eyes told nothing of what she was thinking. “Are you self-conscious?” She asked.

Dazai stared at her, bemused. “You look like you’re going to fall over, digging around in that thing,” he said instead of replying outright.

Again, she merely blinked, looking to not quite understand Dazai’s concern.

Although, Dazai supposed Luna *did* have a point. He would rather do without all the prying eyes on them. Also, he'd prefer to read with a little privacy. Whatever paper—or *papers*, as it looked now—Luna had brought for him, Dazai wanted to take his time sorting through the information. Standing in the open hallway might cause some kind of commotion.

Luna still hadn’t said anything except to stare blankly Dazai’s way.

“Er—Sure. Yes. I’m self-conscious,” he lied just to get her to stop staring like that. He rocked back on his heels. “Let’s sit down.”

“I thought so,” Luna smiled, a vague emotion in her eyes. “You’re always looking around like you expect trouble. Or like maybe you worry what everyone is thinking of you. Don’t worry, Dazai. My dad edits the Quibbler, and he’s really a nice man. He wouldn’t say anything bad about you if you didn’t deserve it,” she said lightly as they entered the library. Dazai guided her towards his favorite seat with little more than a glance her way. “Why, in an article just two months ago, Dad wrote a rather scathing article about a potion-brewer in Knockturn Alley. Purposefully selling dangerous potions like that—! *Oh.* Is this where you want to sit?”

Dazai had already taken a seat before Luna startled out of her one-person conversation.

He really didn’t mind her rambling—mostly. The more she talked, the more information she spilled. Of course, Luna didn’t seem to have anything *important* to say. But the part of Dazai’s mind that was always waiting for people to accidentally spill their secrets was easily willing to sponge up her meandering thoughts. As long as it was prudent, that was.

Dazai leaned into the wall.

This way, he could keep his eyes on the rest of the library without having to worry about watching his back.

Promptly, Luna took the seat across from Dazai. She pulled her over-large bag into her lap with a *thunk* and started sorting through it with hasty fingers.

This time when Luna dug through her bag, she did so without nearly falling over. She made quick work withdrawing a tall stack of papers. It smacked down onto the table between them. The stack looked heavy enough, Dazai imagined if set them on his chest he would suffocate to death.

...though that didn't seem like a very painless death. Dazai sighed forlornly.

“These are all about me?” He asked instead. It wasn’t really a surprise, considering how much the Daily Prophet had to say about him. Still—the Quibbler wasn’t exactly as well-respected as its senior publisher, so he doubted running a story like his garnered it much in the way of sales.

Luna shook her head, silver hair flapping into her face. “No, no. I’ve brought you everything.”

Dazai paused. He looked the pile of papers up-and-down once again, reassessing.

“Everything?”

“Everything my dad has ever published. Well, as much as I could carry today.” Luna brushed a lock of stray hair behind her ear, but it twitched awry a second later. “The ones about you are on top. Of course you’re more concerned with those. But as a new reader of the Quibbler, you should really be reading all the previous articles as well. They were never widely published. I imagine you’re one of only a few people with such a wonderful opportunity.”

Dazai blinked several times as Luna pulled paper after paper out of her bag.

What... was he supposed to say at a time like this?

This was beginning to look like a more daunting task than he originally expected. Originally, he’d just wanted to check what other media outlets were saying about him. But this was turning into a multi-hour reading experience!

Holding back a tired sigh, Dazai grabbed the top-most tabloid. A second later, Luna had replaced it with another ten.

THE HERO IN OUR MIDST: CONFLICT BETWEEN EXORCIST AND SPIRIT IN HOGWARTS!

Dazai sniffed, skimming the article for only a second before gingerly setting it down.

....ah.

“—a shame that so few people will get to read my dad’s works. I’ve read them all a dozen times at least, you know. And I’ve taken the liberty of signing you up to receive the weekly newsletter. You’ll need to start paying on your own, of course. Dad would only let me get you one week free. I called it a ‘friend’s discount.’ I’ve never been able to do that before. Even Ginny won’t read the Quibbler, since she says it’s a bunch of hokum.”

Luna was still rambling. Dazai zoned her out, only keeping one ear out for anything of worth.

“It’s the only thing we disagree on, really. Well, aside from all the fact that she’s always wandering away and turning up hours later. I asked her to stop doing that, but she just says she doesn’t know what I’m talking about. I heard that you also get lost a lot, Dazai. Where do you suppose—”

Well.

Dazai was really starting to understand why the Quibbler’s story had been picked up only by *one person* while the Daily Prophet’s story had been picked up by *absolutely everyone else.*

He glanced down at the paper about him, then the next one in the stack.

TWENTY-TWO WAYS TO TELL IF YOUR CRUSH IS ACTUALLY A BONE-EATING BIRD IN DISGUISE!

Hokum, Ginny had evidently called it.

Dazai was starting to understand why.

The Quibbler didn’t have a good reputation for a reason, Dazai was quickly realizing. Somehow, it had sunk below the level of slander (as in the Daily Prophet), then even further below that into the realm of just saying... well, *anything.*

Utter nonsense, Dazai thought with a scrunched nose.

There didn’t appear to be rhyme-nor-reason to its contents. It jumped wildly from half-true political investigations to nonsense about made-up creatures the next.

The article about himself, for example, spouted out some true information about last year’s incident, then coupled it with inane ramblings about spirits and exorcists. At the very least, Dazai got the sense Luna’s father wasn’t as maliciously motivated as the Daily Prophet was. Still...

“Thank you, Luna. This is...” he paused. The lie fought in his throat. “...this is really helpful.”

Absolutely not.

Luna’s returning smile was blinding. “I’m glad you think so.”

At the very least, Dazai had achieved what he’d set out to. He now knew another player in the magical community’s game of information. And although this one wasn’t particularly reputable... perhaps Mori would find a use for it later.

Maybe.

Well, probably not. But no one could say Dazai hadn’t done his due-diligence.

Speaking of Mori, Dazai thought, he needed to draft a letter to the doctor soon. It was almost time for another progress-report. Not that Dazai had anything to show for it.

“I’m sorry. I suppose this must seem like a lot of reading to do all at once,” Luna apologized. Though Dazai got the sense she wasn’t as sorry as her words might suggest. She still had that eager, if distant, gleam in her eyes. “Perhaps merely reading the latest ones will suffice. Although, you’ll find yourself missing a lot of important information about were-creatures. You never know what might come in handy down the line.”

The question must have been on his face, because Luna wisely added, “Werewolves, weretigers, werefoxes. Dad says anything can be a were-creature. I asked if someone could be a werehuman, and Dad said I should look forward to an article he’s writing for next month. You don’t think that’s possible, do you? A werehuman, I mean. Of course werewolves and the like exist.”

Dazai opened his mouth to respond. To say what, he wasn’t yet sure.

But—

Something brushed past the back of his head.

Dazai shot forward.

That feeling just now—!

“What’s wrong?” Luna asked. “You look as though you’ve just realized something grave. Perhaps an assignment you forgot to do?"

Dazai ignored her.

Noisy. A buzz of magic just behind his head.

Just inches away—!

His eyes snapped to face it—it felt large. Oppressive.

But all that faced Dazai in that direction was a wall. No magic caster, no magical creature.

No... *anything.*

Just a blank wall.

Luna was still talking, but the words no longer registered in his ears.

Magic in the walls?

Dazai’s brows furrowed as tried to make sense of it. This was what he’d felt the other day, wasn’t it?

Only this time it had felt so close as to touch him. A shiver wracked Dazai’s spine as unease rolled through him once again.

What was it? What could get this close to him, without him even knowing it?

Like any other form of magic, it was buzzing with potential danger. A threat. An unknown.

What magic was sneaking about in the walls of Hogwarts?

And why *now?* When he hadn't felt anything like it all last year?

His eyes found a spot on the wall where the sensation seemed to be the strongest. The magic had coiled there, and sent a shivering cold up Dazai's spine.

Just as he started to focus on it—

It moved!

The massive magical energy slithered through the walls of the library. Within just a few seconds, it had grown so far and faint.

Massive and fast, Dazai shuddered.

Without thinking, he bolted to his feet.

He had to know what this thing was. And there was only one way to do that.

"Dazai? What—?"

Paying Luna no heed, he sped away from the table—following the trail of magical energy as it slipped and slithered behind paintings and stone.

He hardly noticed that he was running to keep up with it until a prefect he didn't recognize snapped, *"no running!"* Dazai ignored them.

The magical creature—for it must have been one; Dazai had never felt a spell move in such a manner before—took a harsh turn left.

A few seconds later, Dazai did the same.

A mix of curiosity and trepidation sped his steps. But mostly, it was the unease.

Dazai didn't like being left in the dark. And this creature that had moments before been close enough as to strike him dead if it so wished. It was a complete unknown to him.

And no one else here even seemed to notice its presence!

Evidence enough was the startled, wide-eyed stares he was getting from the other students. People jerked away from his sprint. Murmured slights and shouts alike followed him through one hall and the next.

Sprinting blindly, Dazai nearly slammed into Lockhart.

He narrowly avoided disaster by swerving around the professor at the last second.

"D-Demon!" Lockhart shrilled frightfully.

Then, ostensibly embarrassed by the shocked screech he'd let out, abruptly whirled around and locked himself in his empty classroom.

Dazai paid him no mind.

The magic snaked around a winding staircase.

Dazai took it three steps at a time.

A second later he burst into an empty hallway, sweating and out-of-breath.

Then, just as soon as it appeared, the magic vanished into thin air.

Dazai came to a dead stop.

The corridor was dead silent, save for the sound of Dazai gasping breaths.

"Ah, ha... Where..?"

Looking back and forth, Dazai searched for where the magic had gone. Only, trying to focus found the hall empty of any magic aside from the latent magic always buzzing in the air.

Still catching his breath, Dazai let his eyes slip shut. Just like during his first Remedial Magics lesson, he felt his Magical Sensitivity heighten tenfold. The magic around him turned from a slight buzzing to the static song of a hundred cicadas.

Dazai squeezed his eyes, trying in vain to drown out the overwhelming sensation in favor of the more nuanced one he'd chased all the way here.

Nothing.

Rather than clear anything up, all that had done was give him a headache.

Dazai sighed. He took one last cementing breath before opening his eyes once more.

The hall was empty of students and magical creatures alike. Whatever the creature was that he'd followed, it was long gone now.

Dazai clicked his tongue, muttering a curse under his breath. Just his luck to run all the way here, only to have the damned creature slip out of his grasp!

He took a deep breath, ready to return to Luna at the library. He was already concocting a reasonable lie for his absence as he turned around.

Squeak!

Dazai blinked out of his thoughts—immediately going on the defensive.

Was the creature here, after all?!

"Oh." Dazai's arms stalled over his chest protectively. He dropped them a second later when the source of the sound became obvious.

Angel blinked two amethyst eyes up at him.

"It's you," he said, not bothering to hide the distaste in his voice. Something about Ron's pet rat always made Dazai feel apprehensive. It was almost certainly those dull-but-intelligent eyes. Rats weren't meant to look like they were dissecting you with a glance. But it was clear within the second that Angel wasn't responsible for the magical signature Dazai had followed here. "Don't you have anything better to do than loiter around places like this?"

Angel, predictably, said nothing in return. He did, however, lift his head to stare Dazai in the eyes.

Dazai frowned down at the rat, wondering mutely if it was a bad-friend move to kick Ron's pet.

He was saved from having to consider this any further when, abruptly, Angel scurried a few feet away. Whereupon he turned back to look at Dazai once more.

Dazai took a step forward. Angel wanted him to follow?

Creepy, he shivered. *Ron's stupid pet is the worst.*

Once Dazai was within touching distance of Angel, the rat scampered away again with impressive speed. Dazai continued to follow him.

Angel came to a stop several feet away. He stared.

Dazai stared back.

Then—

His steps halted immediately.

Something wet and red pooled around his shoes. Dazai abruptly noticed the smell of iron hanging thick in the air.

Blood.

Slowly, Dazai raised his gaze from the floor, moving up brick-by-brick until he was staring at the wide-eyed, unmoving stare of a dead cat.

Mrs. Norris. Professor Filch's hall-monitor cat.

The cat's body was completely still. She wasn't breathing. Her body seemed to be crudely wrapped around a light fixture—bones cracked and bent around the iron.

Dazai took a step backwards. A streak of blood marked his step on the floor below.

Mrs. Norris didn't appear to have any wounds on her. The blood wasn't hers.

Rather...

Written on the stone wall in bold and bloody letters, someone had painted:

"THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE."

Dazai stared at it.

'Chamber of Secrets' meant nothing to him. It wasn't a familiar term in the slightest. The only thing familiar about this image was the draw of blood across brick. Dazai had seen enough blood in his lifetime to tell that whoever had written this message had done so with a careful, unshaking finger. They hadn't even used a brush—meaning someone was wandering around the school right now with blood sticking to their index finger.

Dazai slipped the glove off one of his hands. He poked his own finger into the wall and it drew away wet and red.

Still fresh, then. He'd only just barely missed the perpetrator.

A mysterious "heir" and a dangerous magical creature living in the walls...

Was it too much of a coincidence to say this string of events had nothing to do with Lucius' ever-impending test?

"Wha—*Oh my god!"*

Dazai jerked around.

More than a dozen horrified classmates stared back at him.

It was mostly strangers, but a few familiar faces stood among them. Ginny Weasley's horrified stare met Dazai's across the hall, then snapped away just as fast. Pansy's narrow glare was amongst the crowd as well.

He watched as the students looked from Dazai, to Mrs. Norris, to the blood now staining Dazai's hand. The realization in their eyes quickly turned to dread.

Dazai wondered, without a trace of amusement in his veins, if the same expression was reflected on his face as well.

-

"He's a demon!"

“Monster!”

“The demon killed Mrs. Norris!”

Minerva McGonagall heard the cries before she even made it out of the stairwell.

The fear in those voices—it set her heart thundering and her footfalls pounding against the stone. She was pushing ahead of the crowd before even considering otherwise, arms outstretched to shield the students from whatever danger lay ahead.

The first thing her eyes landed on was the boy.

She recognized his familiar mop of brown hair immediately.

Mr. Dazai Osamu.

Minerva disregarded him at once, already desperately searching for the threat.

The threat—!

It was only then that everyone’s words caught up to her.

Demon.

As in Demon Student, Minerva realized with a start.

Dazai blinked at her with two, searching eyes.

He seemed undecided as to whether he should be watching *her* or the *crowd behind her*. Dazai’s mouth opened, then stuttered closed a second later.

Oh.

If the situation was to be believed, then *Dazai* was the threat.

“What exactly is going on here?” Minerva asked. She had to force the calm in her voice.

Tens of voices rose up in chorus behind her, echoing and rumbling and making not a lick of coherent sense to Minerva’s ears. The cacophony didn’t die down even after a long moment.

Across the hall, Dazai had gone perfectly still. Tense. Minerva looked him up and down for sign of danger. Dazai’s empty hands were still, hovering just over his chest—no weapon; not even his wand. He only had one of those strange gloves on, the other held tightly in a closed fist. Something red was sticking to one of his unclothed fingers and his robes looked rumpled. Beside him was—

“Stay back!” She instructed the students at her back with a sudden call. “Now!”

The blank eyed, breathless body of Mrs. Norris dangled beside Dazai.

The red splashed across the wall and over Dazai's hand painted a clear picture in Minerva's mind of what had transpired here.

Dazai followed her gaze and something grim overcame his expression. The bewildered look he'd worn just seconds before was replaced with a blank mask. The reflection of blood beside him and the sinister feel to this whole scene made it seem as if Dazai's eyes were a dangerous shade of piercing red, rather than brown.

Demon, Minerva thought despite herself. *I'm looking at a demon.*

She shook her head, dislodging the impulsive thought but not the wariness.

"Mr. Dazai," she projected her voice across the hall. Dazai, still standing beside the unbreathing form of Mrs. Norris, merely leveled her with a flat look. "Step away from the wall."

Obligingly, Dazai did as she said.

Then, after a second, his hands fell flat at his sides. And though those empty hands posed no threat to begin with, Minerva still found herself relaxing minutely.

"What happened here?" She asked.

The students muttered at her back. Minerva had half a mind to send them away (to shut them up or to keep them safe, she wasn't sure).

Before she could, however, Dazai finally answered. His voice silenced the students as if it were a spell itself.

"I don't know," Dazai's words were softly spoken. "I only just arrived here as well."

Minerva stared at him, eyes narrowed, as she tried to dissect the truth there. She couldn't find any lie, but also couldn't shake the nagging feeling snaking in the back of her head: this boy is dangerous.

Something about the way he held himself; that unflappable, blank look.

Everyone in this school was terrified of him. The Daily Prophet had nothing but bad stories to tell. Quirrell, for all the man was a rat, was dead. Now, standing before a bloody message and a dead cat... It couldn't just be a coincidence.

The blood on Dazai's hand caught the light.

Minerva steeled herself. Without glancing back, she declared, "Students, leave. I will handle this."

A wave of arguments rose up behind her.

"Expel him!"

“I’m not going to class with someone like that!”

“Look what he did!”

“He’s—”

“Enough!” A new voice cut-in. It was oily—older.

Minerva released a breath, relieved for the back-up.

Curiously, she saw Dazai doing the same.

“Are you all idiots?” Severus barked, coming up on Minerva’s left side. “A professor told you to leave, so *leave*. Unless you would all like a private detention with me, I suggest you obey your betters.”

A few students actually squeaked in fear. Under the harsh glare of Severus Snape, most of the students were quick to scamper off.

Notably, however, quite a few lingered for another moment longer. It took another seething glare from the potion master to chase them off.

Even as the students left, they did so with their heads craned around to watch as much as they could.

Minerva frowned, seeing that. When had Dazai become the center of the school’s attention?

If the school was *this* afraid of Dazai, why hadn’t Albus done anything about it yet?

Moreover, why hadn’t Albus told *her* to do something about it?

Beside her, Severus’ expression was severe. He took in the scene without saying a word. The only tell in his expression was the minute pinching of his brow—deepening the more he looked. His lips twitched downward upon reading the message written across the wall. Minerva’s reaction had been a similarly sinking feeling.

Finally, Severus’ gaze came to rest on Dazai’s figure.

The boy stared back, unblinking.

It was silent for a second. The severity of the situation seemed to weigh a ton. Minerva bristled to take action, but didn’t yet know *who* to take action against. It seemed clear that Dazai was the perpetrator, but... Something still held her back.

Regardless, with Severus here now, she was sure Dazai was about to receive the tongue-lashing of a lifetime.

“What did you do *now*, Problem Child?” He sighed, exasperated.

Minerva did a double-take.

Severus pointedly ignored her open-mouthed stare.

Dazai responded with a petulant, “I didn’t do anything. It’s only that everyone here thinks I’m some sort of monster.”

Minerva nearly spit out in shock.

Severus raised a brow. It looked as if he wanted to say something in response to that, but held himself back at the last second. Instead, he took a stern few steps forward, stopping just out of Dazai’s reach. “What happened?”

Dazai eyed the movement for only a second before gesturing to Mrs. Norris with a tilt of his head. “Someone killed this cat and graffitied the wall.” He paused, briefly meeting Minerva’s eyes before choosing instead to focus entirely on Severus. “I’ve got nothing to do with it.”

Severus grunted. “We’ll see,” he said, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with Dazai’s claim.

For his part, Dazai seemed more at ease with that response than anything else. As if he had expected a worse reaction.

Minerva couldn’t blame Dazai for that: the turn this conversation was taking had her utterly dumbfounded.

Severus speaking *slowly? Carefully? Not yelling his fool head off?!*

Had Minerva tripped into an alternate universe where Severus wasn’t an angry, student-hating stick in the mud?

“The—it's on your finger.”

Dazai raised a red-tipped hand. “The blood is still fresh.”

This was... interesting. Severus seemed to be expertly assuaging Dazai’s fears as well as Minerva’s own. And within seconds of his arrival, Severus had managed to placate the rising tensions in the room. It was a good skill to have but... not one *anyone* would associate with a person like Severus.

The words ‘problem child’ still echoed in Minerva’s head, pestering. Fond.

“So you just *touched* it?” Severus huffed. “This better not be your own blood.”

“It’s not. It’s not even the cat’s. Where do you think all this blood came from, Sir?”

“Leave that to the staff to figure out. Not every mystery at Hogwarts is yours to solve, boy.”

Minerva blinked when she finally placed the discrepancy.

Despite Severus’ less-than harsh demeanor, he had yet to actually untense. His shoulders were still snapped straight. The furrow between his brows had yet to fade. It was obvious now that she was looking: Severus wasn’t relaxed at all. He was still just on edge as she was.

Only, something about Dazai had him hesitant enough to not outright detain the boy—as Minerva was sure he would be doing had this been any other student.

Course settled, Minerva strode forward to Severus' side. Two pairs of eyes snapped to her upon approach.

"Wash your hand," she told the boy.

He blinked up at her, lost for words, when she pulled a clean cloth from her cloak and held it out.

After a second, Dazai hesitantly took the handkerchief. He scrubbed the blood from his hand until there wasn't a trace of red left behind.

Handing the dirtied cloth back, Dazai said a wary, "...thanks." Then he re-gloved the exposed hand and hid it from sight once more.

Minerva folded it up with a mental note to clean it thoroughly later. Then, to Dazai and Severus, she said, "I would like to have this conversation elsewhere." Away from the students. *If Dazai is dangerous, I won't have anyone getting hurt.*

Severus seemed to hear the unspoken words, if the narrowing of his eyes were any indication. But he didn't comment on it, instead saying, "I would prefer to avoid eavesdroppers."

Dazai merely stared up at them, silent. Whatever goodwill let him banter with Severus apparently didn't extend to her. She eyed the boy closely.

"We'll need to cast—"

"Dazai!"

All three of them startled badly, whipping to face the sound at once.

Minerva raised a hand out to hold the oncoming student back—to protect them from *whatever* this may be.

Luna Lovegood—a Ravenclaw, if Minerva recalled correctly—stumbled to a stop at the top of the stairwell.

Luna looked between the professors, then Dazai, then the blood-ridden wall. She took in the scene with wide, impassive eyes and a thoughtful hum.

Evidently having decided what was most important, she finally settled an eerily blank-eyed look on the Slytherin boy.

"You wandered off," she said, paying the stiff-spined professors no mind. Though the worn bag on her shoulder must have weighed a ton, Luna didn't seem to worry over the weight. Her expression was serene and empty despite everything. "The least you could have done was to help me pick up all the articles I brought you. Instead, I had to pick them all up myself. It took quite a while, you know."

“Right. *Uh*... My bad?” Dazai croaked out.

Minerva frowned, not entirely untensing, but calmed enough to drop her hands back to her sides. “Ms. Lovegood,” she said, “I ask that you leave us, for the time being.”

Luna barely glanced her way. “I’ve been looking for you. I wouldn’t have found you if it weren’t for all the screaming. People really don’t like you, Dazai. I only had to follow the shouting to figure out where you’d run off to so suddenly. Why did you run off? Was there an evil spirit you sensed?” She blinked, as if abruptly realizing something. Finally, she turned her whole focus onto Minerva and Severus. “Do you read the Quibbler, Professors?”

Severus answered for her, “Return to wherever you were before this, Ms. Lovegood. This is a serious matter. I have no patience for nosy students today.”

Luna barely seemed to register the command.

Minerva glanced to Severus, as if to ask, *what now?*

But something stopped her short.

Severus had an arm raised out, guarding, in front of Dazai.

As if he thought Dazai was the one here who needed protecting. *Dazai*—with blood on his hands and enough bad press to his name to keep people up at night.

He was undoubtedly guilty in some capacity. And yet Severus had decided he wasn’t any sort of threat.

A knot wrapped itself in Minerva’s stomach and a thousand questions burned in her mind. Only now wasn’t the time to grill Severus over them.

Minerva met Severus’ eyes, and slowly Severus stepped away from his station. He looked reluctant to do so.

“I remembered about an assignment I’d forgotten to do,” Dazai said suddenly to Luna.

It broke Minerva and Severus’ silent staring-contest. But she didn’t miss the moment of clear disbelief shining in Severus’ eyes at Dazai’s words. Minerva found herself matching that emotion. She couldn’t remember even a single assignment Dazai had ever turned in. Unless the boy’s work ethic had done a one-eighty in the last hour, he was obviously lying.

“I went to go get it, but got lost on the way. Sorry for running off.”

Minerva scowled, not believing that for even a second.

Except that, a breath later, Severus let out a long-suffering sigh. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Resignation deflated his entire being.

“You can’t be serious,” Minerva said before she could stop herself. “The Slytherin dorms are nowhere near here.”

“They aren’t?” Dazai squeaked, innocent surprise oozing out of his very being.

It was such a contrast to the demon she’d seen minutes earlier that Minerva nearly did a double-take.

“No. Not even close,” Severus answered, surrender painting his tone. He turned to Luna. “Ms. Lovegood. When did you last see Mr. Dazai?”

All of Minerva’s reservations immediately shattered into sheer disbelief. This boy... he couldn’t be serious. That was such an absurdly obvious lie. No one could possibly get so lost, they wound up on an entirely different floor, then accidentally stumbled into a scene like this! Why was he sticking to the lie?

And why did it look like everyone but her believed it?

Luna hummed, a small smile playing on her lips. “It couldn’t have been more than a few minutes ago, Sir.”

Severus nodded. “I see. Ms. Lovegood—”

Luna perked up minutely.

“—Go and fetch Madam Pomfrey and tell her to come here as soon as possible.”

“Alright,” Luna said, smilingly. She didn’t hesitate for even a second before whirling around and vanishing down the stairs. She was gone just like that. Minerva had no clue what was going on in that girl’s head.

Speaking of people who were rapidly becoming incomprehensible to Minerva—

She turned a serious look onto Severus.

He grunted. “We need to be taking Mr. Dazai to see the headmaster. Minerva, if you’ll guard the area.”

Dazai twitched at the announcement, but didn’t seem especially surprised that they would be seeing Albus now. Whether he was the culprit or not... at least the boy understood the severity of what he’d wandered into.

Minerva nodded.

She then instructed both Dazai and Severus to step back. Only when they were quite a few feet away did Minerva finally cast the barrier spell. She lifted her wand into the air and said the incantation aloud to herself, *“invia obice.”*

Magic burst from her raised wand and a shimmering wall of opaque blue rose up on either side of the hallway. It blocked off both sides completely and only let the slightest hints of light through. No one would be crossing this hall any time soon.

Certain that no student would be capable of dismantling her shield, Minerva tucked her wand back in her cloak. Unless she broke the spell apart herself, no one would be able to enter this hallway. It was a much more practical way of guarding than what the staff had been instructed to do last year for the Philosopher's Stone—a guard that was designed to be *difficult* to pass, but not *impossible*. That had been a shield meant to be broken, albeit with some trouble. This was decidedly not.

She turned back to Severus, content with the power of the shield she'd put in place, and he nodded. He was clearly as eager to get moving as she was.

Dazai, however, was focused on something else.

He was staring holes into the impassable, magic barrier with a look of intense concentration on his face.

"You won't be able to perform a spell like that anytime soon," Severus huffed, evidently reading his snake's expression easily. "Enough lollygagging, boy."

As soon as it came on, that look of deep focus vanished. A pleasant smile took its place within the instant.

The abruptness of the change was jarring, and Minerva found herself tensing up again because of it. Severus, however, seemed to have anticipated that reaction.

"Let's move," Severus said, voice low and unamused. "I'd rather not run into another crowd of students when news hits the rest of the school."

Not needing to be told twice, both Minerva and Dazai followed Severus to the stairwell.

As they walked to Albus' office, Minerva couldn't keep her gaze from sliding to Dazai every few seconds. The boy had no discernible expression on his face—as though he simply felt nothing at all for the situation at hand. It was unnerving. Even the most innocent of students (perhaps especially those students) would look nervous to be suspected of an attack of this caliber. More-so unnerving was how Dazai seemed to be so quickly shifting from uncaring to innocent to joking at the drop of a hat.

It isn't just unnerving, she thought, *it's unnatural.*

Unconsciously, Minerva's hand felt for the wand in her cloak.

Just in case.

Suddenly, Dazai turned to face her.

Minerva raised a solitary brow.

A normal student, Minerva knew from experience, would avert their eyes. Would say, "sorry, Ma'am," would say, "will I be expelled?" would say, "I'm innocent, I swear!"

The boy walking beside her was no ordinary student. Some even went so far as to call him a demon.

Dazai's lips curved into a half-moon smile. "This is such a hassle! I'd rather just die," he whined.

-

After receiving a rather long-winded lecture from Snape regarding his so-called *"too casual remarks about death,"* Dazai now waited poised in Albus Dumbledore's office.

Dazai had never been here before.

In the past, his only real conversation with the headmaster had taken place in the infirmary—Dazai being too weak at the time to talk anywhere else. But now that he was finally in the man's office, it was painting a good picture of just who Dumbledore was.

Now, Dazai sat in the plush chair adjacent to Dumbledore's desk while Snape, McGonagall, and the headmaster himself held a silent conversation overhead. Despite being the ones to force him here, they seemed to be trying to avoid catching his gaze. Every few seconds, he would meet Dumbledore's eyes only for the man to regard him with an odd look. Dazai looked away without a word, and Dumbledore went back to rolling a white pawn in his fingers. He was standing over the chess set in such a way that Dazai couldn't make out who was winning.

Never mind them—Dazai was still reeling from the *magic-infused headache* that was Dumbledore's office. He could use the extra time to make sense of all these sensations.

And there was a *lot* of magic sensation.

It had been almost overwhelming at first. The room was wall-to-wall magical items. Each one had Dazai's skin prickling.

It took a minute for Dazai to ignore the buzzing sensation of magic enough that it was manageable. Only then could he really take a look around the room:

There were the artifacts, of course. Some still and others rattling around noisily. Some of them had quite a bit of magic in them, while others seemed barely enchanted at all. The part of Dazai that wanted to study each and every one of those artifacts was tempered by the headache working its way into his skull. The amount of magic here was close to sickening.

Dazai's eyes caught on a particularly potent cauldron standing opposite Dumbledore's desk. Magic was practically oozing out of it, though Dazai supposed that was par for the course when it came to potion-making.

And lastly: the bird.

After finally suppressing the overwhelming feeling of magic threatening to knock him over, Dazai's focus latched onto the bird. It had feathers the color of the sun and wings that must have been cramped in that tiny, gilded cage. Dazai almost felt sympathy for it.

But more importantly, it wasn't really a bird.

Or—perhaps it was. But Dazai could feel the magic rolling off of it in waves. Some kind of magical bird, then.

Dazai eyed it warily. This bird didn't have the same magical signature as the creature he'd chased through the halls earlier, but that didn't mean it wasn't also a threat.

Dazai was still trying to figure out what kind of bird it was when the last of their guests finally arrived.

Professors Sprout, Flitwick, Lockhart *(ew),* and a few others Dazai didn't immediately recognize arrived in one group. Dazai noted that Professor Binns wasn't present. Likely, the ghost was busy in his classroom, hovering over textbooks and only somewhat tethered to reality.

Snape, McGonagall, and Dumbledore, who had already been present from the start, greeted them with terse silence.

Only then did Dumbledore stop fiddling with his chess board and make his way towards the center of the room. Dazai used the opportunity to peek at the game. Whoever he was playing, Dazai thought, wasn't very good. The ordering of the pieces didn't make any sense. Neither black nor white was winning, and it seemed like maybe Dumbeldore had made up his own rules for the game.

But he didn't have time to think about that now. With everyone gathered, it was time to focus.

Dazai kicked his feet against the base of the chair. He was the only one sitting—even the headmaster choosing to loom over him. The rest of the staff had taken up a semi-circle around his seat. It felt a little like being on trial.

"What's going on?" Professor Sprout asked, the curiosity in her voice mingling with a kind of cautiousness. "We heard talk on the way over here... has something happened?" Her eyes flashed to Dazai, then away again. Beside her, the other professors did the same.

One of the professors Dazai wasn't familiar with (a severe-looking woman with long and flat auburn hair) glowered. She crossed her arms over her chest, red robes wrinkling. "All we were told was that there was an attack and to come straight here. I take it this is our culprit?"

"Not necessarily, Septima," Dumbledore hummed.

Septima... that was the Arithmancy professor, right? Seeing as it was a class only offered to third-years and above, Dazai had never met Professor Septima Vector before.

Professor Vector didn't look convinced. She continued to glare a judging hole into Dazai's head, where it fell right into place beside his headache.

“You have not been misled about there being an attack. However, our culprit is still unknown.”

“Nonsense!”

Everyone startled at the sudden exclamation, save for Dumbledore, Severus, and Dazai.

The headmaster’s inscrutable eye fell onto Dazai, contemplative.

“You believe the boy’s lies, Albus?” Lockhart tutted. He shook his head sadly, as though the others were too pitiful to even look at. “I can assure you, this demon is responsible for the attack!”

Silence answered him.

Someone cleared their throat.

“You don’t even know what happened,” Snape ground out. “Quit your barking and quietly listen for once.”

Lockhart’s perfect smile fell, but only for a second. “I don’t need to know the specifics!” He said, recovering quickly. “I have all the proof I need right here!”

In a wide, sweeping gesture that had Sprout recoiling, Lockhart drew everyone’s eyes onto Dazai.

“The Demon of Hogwarts! For him to be here, he must be culpable. Lighting doesn’t strike the same place twice, Albus,” Lockhart said confidently, despite the wisdom in his words falling flat. “First all that Quirrell business, then threatening me at my book signing, and tackling me just earlier today! Now this... this—*whatever this is!”*

Snape bristled and his shoulders rose to his chin. “He is a *child*, not a *demon*.”

The other professors nervously shifted in place.

Looking at them now, Dazai could easily see who between them believed the Daily Prophet, and who was temporarily reserving judgment. Aside from Snape, not a one of the professors was so blatantly in Dazai’s corner.

“And I won’t have you throwing around blind claims like that until we’ve completed an investigation into the matter. I hardly think—”

“Gilderoy has a point, Severus,” Dumbledore interrupted. Though his voice was quiet and mellow, it commanded everyone’s attention effortlessly.

Lockhart preened.

Snape’s fists shook with a silent rage.

“Whether Mr. Dazai is innocent or not, this is surely too many coincidences to ignore.”

Snape and Dumbledore shared a private look.

Whatever passed between them, Dazai doubted it was good. A second later, Snape turned to watch the other professors without saying a word. Clearly, they'd come to an understanding, but it wasn't one the potion master was happy about.

"What happened?" One of the professors asked. The thick-rimmed glasses sitting on her nose made her expression appear especially earnest. "I've not foreseen this. Everything's been so fuzzy as of late—"

"Do not take the blame onto yourself, Sybill," Dumbledore soothed. "It cannot be helped. From here, we can only move forward."

That must be the professor for divination, then. Sybill Trelawney.

"First: let me clear up any questions you all may have. Just a few minutes ago, Minerva came upon a frightening scene. Would you care to explain?"

McGonagall nodded. "I found Mr. Dazai standing beside the body of Mrs. Norris. It appeared someone had written a message on the wall with blood," she summarized neatly. "It mentioned the Chamber of Secrets by name."

A gasp shot through the crowd.

Dazai parsed through each of their expressions, but found no information aside from a mixture of shock and fear.

The way McGonagall had phrased that, though...

Dazai was sure of it: this Chamber of Secrets—whatever it was—was no secret to the staff at Hogwarts.

"The Chamber..." Sprout said, looking visibly ill. "How did Mr. Dazai—*er*—how did *a student* find out about that?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "That matter is currently unclear as well."

"Is the Chamber—" Flitwick abruptly stopped. His eyes flashed to Dazai, then back to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore replied with a thin-lipped, quelling smile.

Flitwick held his tongue.

They don't want me to know about this Chamber of Secrets, Dazai surmised with a pout. *Or they're afraid to let the main suspect know more than he already might?*

"Ha!" Lockhart butt-in. The awful grin on his face didn't ease up. Somehow, he looked over-the-moon about the current situation. Dazai mentally rolled his eyes. "I know this boy well, Albus! He must have pressured some of the staff into learning about it! Frightened out of

their minds, they spilled the truth. Only for Mr. Dazai to turn around and use said truth for evil!"

Vector spoke over Lockhart, clearly uninterested in what he had to offer, "If not a student, then an outsider."

"I am considering that as a possibility, yes." Something briefly flashed across Dumbledore's face, but Dazai couldn't place it. "Although, as Minerva has told me, it didn't appear anyone aside from Mr. Dazai was at the forefront of this scene."

Vector sniffed. She turned her pointed gaze onto Dazai, who stared back unwavering.

"I don't think our Mr. Dazai is the guilty party, Sep," the divination teacher said, not unkindly.

Vector blinked her attention onto Trelawney, then looked away with a red flush over her cheeks.

"Not guilty? You sound sure. You have Seen something after all," Minerva said.

Trelawney startled. *"Er...* well, no. Just a feeling I have."

In response, most of the staff rolled their eyes. But Dumbledore and Vector gave her considering looks.

Snape cleared his throat. He shot Dazai the briefest of glances before turning his full focus on Dumbledore. "I brought Mr. Dazai here so we might get to the bottom of this issue before releasing him to the wolves."

"Wolves?" Sprout frowned.

Snape shot her a look. A second later, realization dawned on her face. Looking around, Dazai saw similar expressions on the others' faces as well.

How did you all forget that everyone at this school wants me dead?

"I appreciate the moment's reprieve, Sir." Dazai finally took his moment to interject. Everyone's eyes snapped straight to him. "But I think wolves only get hungrier when you deny them their meal."

Snape made a face at that—somewhere between startled and disgusted.

Taking this as his cue to move forward, Dumbledore walked to his desk. He leaned his weight into it, not seeming to care about the nick-knacks he pushed around doing so. Dumbledore leveled Dazai with a patient, but thoughtful stare.

Dazai's first thought was to not trust that look.

The contemplative intelligence in the headmaster's eyes could only spell trouble.

“Why don’t you tell us your side of the story?” He asked. Around the room, the professors perked up in obvious interest. “How did you come across the scene?”

Dazai repeated his story back to Dumbledore and the others, telling them how he got lost and accidentally stumbled across the body of Mrs. Norris. At the disbelieving looks Dazai was getting, Snape resignedly explained that this sort of behavior was normal. Dazai was always getting lost.

He then explained about how the blood was still fresh, so the culprit couldn’t have been gone long. Dazai carefully excluded details about the mysterious magical creature he’d followed and about his suspicions for Lucius’ test. They didn’t need to know those things, and it would only draw unwanted attention his way.

The professors listened to his every word quietly. Even Lockhart, for once, seemed to be willing to pass on being the center of attention in order to listen. Trying to pick out details for his next novel, Dazai presumed.

“I didn’t see anyone else,” Dazai finished. “Just the cat and the blood. Other than that, the hall was empty.” He crossed his legs one over the other, then asked, “Do you have any suspects other than me? I’m sure you can find someone else suspicious in this school. Like... Pansy Parkinson is starting a gang! Graffiti is a staple for delinquents like her.”

“A-a gang?!”

Dazai nodded sagely. “It’s awful, I know.”

“If he didn’t see anything, there’s no reason for him to be here,” Vector drawled. “Leave this to those of us who can actually bring something to the table.” Here, her eyes very noticeably pointed to Lockhart.

“He’s neglecting to explain the part where we found him with the blood *on his hands.”* Snape said.

Before the other professors could object, Dazai carefully explained, “I wanted to see if it was still fresh. It was, by the way. I must’ve only been a few seconds late.”

“Seconds?” Minerva asked, blatantly suspicious. “So sure it wasn’t minutes? Even an hour?”

Dazai shrugged in response, not wanting to explain about the presence he’d followed there. In reality, he might’ve been just a few sprinting steps behind the culprit. If this *was* a part of Lucius’ test, then Dazai needed to keep tight control over the information.

The staff took in his lack of answer with matching frowns before turning to one another to talk. Dazai had to strain to make out their conversation.

“He could be lying—” They whispered.

“He is! Demons can’t tell the truth. I’ve been telling you all from the start—”

“Will you shut up, Gilderoy?”

“We need to consider every angle. And Mr. Dazai has a precedent for trouble of this caliber.”

“But the Chamber of Secrets... he shouldn’t even know what that is!”

“As if that’s stopped him before.”

Dazai watched the proceedings with a flat expression. He hadn’t expected any other reaction, but it was still a bit annoying for them to be talking about him as though he weren’t three feet away.

Curiously, Dumbledore hadn’t moved to join the other staff. He remained leaned up against the desk, weathered hands idly fiddling with a gold-glowing artifact.

Dazai looked up and met the headmaster’s eyes head-on.

Dumbledore was staring directly at him. How long..?

Dazai’s frowned deepened, but he held Dumbledore’s gaze.

“Can I help you, Sir?” Dazai asked, keeping his voice low and smooth.

Surprise briefly flashed across the headmaster’s expression—he hadn’t anticipated Dazai breaking the silence between them. It was masked just as fast. Amusement glittered in his eyes instead.

“I was merely considering it odd that, of all the students, it should be *you* who I find in my office today.”

Dazai kept his lips flat, but internally he was glowering.

Upon hearing Dumbledore speak, the professors abruptly went silent. Their attention snapped back to the room’s other two occupants.

"I have the worst luck,” Dazai said with a huff. He uncrossed his legs, leaning back into the seat instead.

“If you are truly innocent in this attack, then I would have to believe your luck to be the worst I’ve ever seen,” Dumbledore chuckled quietly to himself. Then, he sighed. “Between the public’s opinion of you and today’s event, I have no choice but to consider you a prime suspect.”

“Fantastic. Really—just my luck,” Dazai droned, giving the headmaster a half-hearted grin. Dumbledore gave him a tight-lipped smile in return. This was exactly the reaction he had wanted to avoid. It was also *exactly* the reaction Dazai had expected after being carted into the headmaster's office.

In the eyes of the entire magical community, Dazai had been guilty before the year had even begun.

“The entire campus is afraid of him...” Professor Flitwick commented slowly, “Perhaps it is best, for now, to assume he is guilty. Have him expelled from campus now.”

Vector agreed with a sharp nod. “Once the Daily Prophet catches wind, Hogwarts will come under fire. Again.” She sniffed. “You shouldn’t have allowed him back in the first place, Albus. I don’t care if he’s innocent—his being here is staining Hogwarts' good name.”

“And frightening the students.”

“No one deserves to be blamed without reason,” Sprout said. “Despite what the Daily Prophet says about him, Dazai deserves the same.”

“Neither do the other students deserve to live in constant fear,” McGonagall countered harshly.

Dumbledore hummed. He briefly closed his eyes, hiding his true thoughts from view.

When he finally opened them again and began to speak—

A knock at the door stopped him at once. All eyes in the room snapped straight to the source of the sound.

However, Dumbledore’s now open eyes fell instead on Dazai’s quiet form.

Dazai stared back.

“You may enter.”

A second later, the door flung open and Madam Pomfrey burst into the room. She stumbled to a faltering stop upon seeing everyone’s eyes on her.

“Oh. I wasn’t aware that—Wait. Why is Mr. Dazai here?” She asked, blinking several times in bewilderment. Rather than look to Dazai himself for answers, or even to Dumbledore, Pomfrey cast a quick glance in Snape’s direction.

“Mr. Dazai,” McGonagall answered, “is our main suspect.”

Pomfrey’s mouth dropped open. She shook her head and closed it within the second. “That’s not possible.”

Around the room, everyone paused at her words.

Trelawney nodded frantically, as if she had somehow anticipated that piece of information.

For Dazai’s part, he was just as confused as the others looked.

Of course *he* knew that he was innocent. But Dazai was sure that he had no alibi to corroborate that—Luna’s testimony really only stood to cast further suspicion on him. So why was the Hogwarts’ matron so certain of Dazai’s innocence?

“What makes you say so, Poppy?” Dumbledore asked.

Pomfrey sighed, finally closing the door behind her and walking across the room to join the professors’ circle. She came to a stop just over Dazai’s left shoulder.

“First, I should start with this: Mrs. Norris is not dead. She was *petrified*.”

A series of gasps rose up throughout the room.

Clearly, this was a devastating revelation, but Dazai had no idea *why*.

Dumbledore’s expression turned suddenly very grave.

Pomfrey continued, “Argus is with her now. As long as I can pull together the proper potions, she should recover just fine. Though it will take some time to get everything in order.”

Dazai had been sure the cat hadn’t been breathing, and had been even *more* sure that she was dead.

The effects and applications of magic never ceased to confound him.

"What is petrification?” Dazai asked, cutting in. He paused.

Now, how to frame this in a way that didn’t sound like he was digging for information...

“Is it a type of spell?” He whirled on Snape. “Hey, Sir. I want to learn something cool like that in our next lesson. The spell you have me doing now is boring.”

“You especially shouldn’t be casting high level spells. I have you practicing *Motus Subtilis* for a reason—” Snape suddenly stopped mid-sentence. His eyes widened minutely.

Meanwhile, a few of the professors cast him questioning looks.

Understanding dawned across Snape’s face. *“Oh.* I see.”

Dazai *ooh*-ed. At the exact second Snape had, Dazai understood Pomfrey’s claim as well.

From the desk, Dumbledore hummed as he also seemed to realize the discrepancy.

“What?” Lockhart asked, looking between everyone, “Why are you all looking like that?”

Pomfrey turned to the other gathered professors. “There isn’t a non-magical way to petrify someone in such a manner. Meaning, simply: our culprit must be able to either cast a very powerful spell or possesses some innate petrifying quality.”

Like a magical creature, Dazai thought. *One that may-or-may not currently be living in the walls.*

“And? He’s a demon! I wouldn’t put it past him.” Lockhart tutted.

Snape took a step forward, standing not-so-subtly between Lockhart and his student. “Mr. Dazai isn’t capable of performing even low-level spells without falling ill.”

“Seeing as he looks to be in good health right now, I’d say he hasn’t spell-cast all day,” Pomfrey concluded. Her smile was distinctly smug when she turned it on Lockhart.

Vector made a thoughtful sound upon hearing Pomfrey’s reasoning. Then her eyes fell to Dazai, wearing an expression like she was reconsidering her thoughts on him.

“You’re all just making excuses.” Lockhart sighed, evidently distraught. “I simply don’t believe it. If any of you had even a *quarter* of the experience I had, you wouldn’t be so easily swayed!”

Flitwick shook his head, stepping forward. “No, no. They’re right. I’ve had the boy in my class for some time now. Although I try not to have him casting where I’m able, when he does it always results in him falling suddenly ill.” He paused, then, “No. I’m sure of it: Mr. Dazai couldn’t have cast a spell like that.”

“You said the blood was still fresh?”

Minerva nodded. “Meaning: if he were the culprit, Mr. Dazai would likely not have been standing when we found him.”

“I see,” Vector said.

“It seems we’ve nicely wrapped up this investigation,” Trelawney hummed. Her voice held a far-away quality to it. Not dissimilar to Luna’s, Dazai thought. “Although that still leaves one question.”

“Who’s the real culprit?”

“Indeed. We have no other clues.”

Lockhart brought a finger to his chin, stroking it thoughtfully.

Without warning, he suddenly flipped from ‘slightly told-off' to ‘flashy narcissist’ in a second flat. “A real mystery! Although I remain unconvinced of Mr. Dazai’s innocence, I would gladly investigate this heinous crime for you all. I’m sure my expertise will be of great assistance!”

Snape groaned audibly.

McGonagall gave Lockhart an unimpressed look. “Thank you for your help.”

It seemed everyone in the room except for Lockhart himself could hear the falseness oozing out of McGonagall’s every word.

Dazai cut through the tension with a flashy smile. “Your willingness to turn on a student at a moment’s notice is truly inspiring, Sir.”

In return, Dazai received odd, slightly perturbed glances from all of the professors present. Even Lockhart himself looked momentarily off-put.

Dumbledore cleared his throat, pulling everyone's attention back to him.

Dazai turned, and once again Dumbledore spoke to the entire room while keeping his eyes on Dazai alone. The focus was blistering.

"I am content for now in saying Mr. Dazai is innocent," Dumbledore said. Though his tone was pleasant, Dazai heard the distinct hesitance in his words. He hadn't completely written off Dazai's involvement.

Dazai narrowed his eyes, and though Dumbledore must have seen the change in expression, he didn't comment on it.

"We shall end this meeting here. Please, everyone, keep watch for any suspicious activity you may witness." Dumbledore finally leaned off the desk. He smiled agreeably at the present staff. "Thank you all for coming. Let's hope our next staff meeting occurs under less dire circumstances."

It was silent for a second before the professors started to slowly shift towards the door. Dazai waited a moment longer before standing himself. He cast the headmaster a long, thoughtful look before turning his back to the man.

"Severus, Minerva. If you two would stay behind for a moment," Dumbledore said just as Dazai was about to leave. "We have further matters to discuss."

Dazai looked to Snape, but found the potion master's attention fully on Dumbledore instead. He frowned. Dazai wanted little more than to snoop on whatever conversation was about to happen, but with so many people around he didn't think he'd manage to sneak back in.

Dazai sighed and walked out the door just a step ahead of the Arithmancy professor. Vector scoffed when Dazai pushed passed her.

She shut the door.

Dumbledore's private conversation was immediately muted.

The professors didn't waste time in mingling, and by the time Dazai had exited the office it was only Vector, Trelawney, and Dazai who remained.

"Good luck with those wolves, boy," Vector said suddenly, her voice flat of inflection and expression inscrutable.

Dazai jumped. He hadn't expected her to interact with him, but she had clearly been looking directly at him when she spoke.

"Thanks," Dazai replied, "I think."

She levelled him with a thoughtful look. Then, Vector shook her head as if dislodging an unpleasant thought. Without another word, she stepped away to join Trelawney at the end of the hall before turning out of sight.

Dazai sighed, then left in the opposite direction. It seemed as though the year was just starting to get interesting.

Now, if only he could figure out which way the Slytherin common room was from here...

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading, commenting, etc! ily!! and happy birthday to everyone this week lol
i think i made up the invia obice spell too but i can't remember anymore lmaoo
hope everyone has a great week! see yall next wednesday! : D

next up: dazai comes up with a plan of action

Little Red

Chapter Summary

To no one's surprise: everyone blames Dazai for what happened to Mrs. Norris.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dazai ducked his head as he walked down the hall, keeping his eyes low to the ground and his senses elsewhere. He probed his focus around the school, but felt no sign of the powerful magical creature he'd felt just earlier that day.

Gone. Without a trace.

But Dazai still had the nagging feeling that it was close. With the speed it had been able to move at, Dazai didn't doubt that it could strike at any moment.

The whole situation had Dazai more on edge than he would have liked. Between this new magical threat and the students (who now had more of a reason than ever to hate him), Dazai was facing enemies on all fronts. And unfortunately, in a place like Hogwarts there was really nowhere to hide. There were even fewer chances for Dazai to just wait for things to blow over, seeing as every time he took a moment to breath it seemed as if the Daily Prophet had one more awful thing to say about him.

After today...

Ugh. Dazai could imagine the inflammatory headlines already.

Wind rustled his hair as Dazai walked out into the courtyard. He took a deep, steadying breath and let the mid-autumn air wash over him. It was nice out—sunny and blue-skied. Too nice out for all the doom-laden thoughts currently riddling holes in his brain.

After his meeting with the headmaster it was only more obvious than before: everyone here saw him as a threat. Even the professors had been distinctly hesitant to trust him despite being given Pomfrey's certain testimony. Dazai wondered if they were aware that he saw them as the threat in this situation. Probably not.

Dazai sighed as he tore his focus away from the walls. Whatever creature he was looking for must have decided to lay low after its attack. Searching right now would be useless.

In the meantime, he needed...

Dazai frowned.

If he were back in Yokohama right now, with access to all the resources he could ever want, what would he ask Mori for..?

Dazai meditated on this while he walked. So deep in his thoughts, he didn't notice—

Something sharp and hard suddenly cut into his cheek.

Dazai jumped, hands instinctively raising to his chest protectively. His eyes whipped around the courtyard.

Two students sneered at him from several feet away.

Dazai recognized them immediately as Pansy's new friends—the two students he'd met earlier that year on the train. Millicent Bulstrode and Tracey Davis. Both were holding stones.

Millicent tossed a stone up and down. Meanwhile, Tracey was crouching down in the stone garden, rolling a dozen pebbles between her fingers.

Something wet slipped down Dazai's face.

When he raised a hand to catch it, his cheek stung.

For the second time today, Dazai's glove came away wet with fresh blood.

"You threw a stone at me," Dazai commented numbly. He flexed his fingers, watching how the blood shined in the light. "I'm getting sick of people hitting my face. Everyone will see the see the bruise."

Tracey and Millicent didn't pay him any heed.

"You killed Mrs. Norris!" Tracey spat, vitriolic and unapologetic for it. "Everyone knows what you did. What you are."

Dazai regarded them with a cold eye. He had half a mind to just keep walking and ignore them.

Actually... that wasn't a bad idea. These brats had nothing to offer him but stones. Dazai had more important things to do, like writing an update to Mori and hunting down a magical creature. Everyone here hated him, and that was hardly new. There was no need to dwell on it. No need to bite back at kids who barely understood what they were angry about.

And with only the three of them here, Dazai didn't have to worry about Crabbe and Goyle holding him down like last time.

"Wha—hey!"

Certain of his course, Dazai started up his walk again, destination set for the other end of the courtyard. The sooner he was inside and focusing on his work, the better. A few stones didn't

bother him. He'd had far worse, and it was hardly going to help his reputation to teach these two a lesson.

The sound of whipping wind was the only indication Dazai had that another stone had been thrown his way.

It smacked into his shoulder with a *thump* before clattering to the path below.

A second later, two more stones pelted against Dazai's back.

"Where do you think you're going, demon?" Millicent growled, loosing another rock in Dazai's direction.

This one smacked into the side of Dazai's head. Despite himself, Dazai actually stumbled against the hit as pain and dizziness suddenly lanced through him.

"Got him!" Millicent cawed. The duo cheered. "Tracey, grab some more rocks!"

The sound of scrabbling stones gave Dazai a precious few seconds to regain his bearings. Head wounds were inconvenient, being so disorientating like that. He shook his head.

"Are you stupid? Forget the rocks!" Tracey shot back. "Now we've got his attention, let's do the real deal!"

"Y-yeah! Right! Hey, Demon! How do you feel about being jinxed?"

Magic.

They were going to cast magic at him.

Dazai actually stopped at that.

Stones were one thing—immature and scratching. Magic was...

Dazai felt anticipation swirl noxiously in his stomach.

Magic meant No Longer Human.

Quickly, he turned to face the duo.

Suddenly remembering his conversation with the professors earlier, Dazai dryly commented to himself, *"I told you wolves can't be sated, stupid Snape."*

He was going to have to deal with these brats, after all.

I guess, Dazai thought, *just waiting for the storm to pass won't be good enough.*

Then, *Maybe I'll have to get my hands dirty, after all.*

Notably, though Tracey was reaching for her wand, Millicent was still bent over the stones.

Half-way through brandishing her wand, Tracey suddenly looked up to see Dazai watching. She squeaked upon realizing he had stopped and was now looking their way.

"Milli!" She half-whispered half-shouted. "Throw another stone! That freak is looking at us and I-I'm not ready to cast yet!"

"Just cast it!" Millicent sniped back. However, she still didn't waste a second in arching her arm back in a throw.

"I've never done this spell before!"

Before Millicent could pelt it, Dazai cut-in, "Shouldn't you be more scared of me?"

Millicent startled badly, fumbling the throw. Instead of cutting into its intended target, the stone ineffectually clattered to the ground at the girl's feet.

"By your definition," Dazai continued, unperturbed even as Millicent frantically grabbed for another rock to throw. "I'm some kind of volatile monster. If that were really the case, I wouldn't suggest provoking me. Use the killing curse, if you're going to use a spell at all."

"W-we're doing the noble thing!" Tracey spat, but the grip on her wand was loose now. "Chasing out the monster before it can hurt anyone else!"

Millicent whipped another stone at him. Only it missed it's mark by a foot. It cracked loudly against a brick pillar.

"You're idiots!" Dazai quipped, drawing some cheer into his voice. Millicent and Tracey balked at his tone. "But no worse than your boss. Hey, did Pansy tell you to come out here and pelt stones at me?"

"I'm not answering to a demon!" Millicent shouted.

At the same time, Tracey said, "Not the stones *specifically."*

Millicent shot her a quelling glare.

"Of course she did," Dazai grumbled under his breath. Pansy was a thorn in his side—a different kind of problem than the Daily Prophet and Lucius, but a problem nonetheless. The kind of problem that Mori and Father had altogether failed to prepare him for. *Torture and kill your enemies,* they said.

Well, what about when that thoughtless killing was what got you into this mess in the first place?

Of course, the issue with Pansy was more complex than that, but Dazai couldn't solve the girl's inner turmoil. If Draco and Blaise preferred him to her that was hardly Dazai's fault. He was endlessly charming, after all.

As with everything else, Dazai was going to have to play a slow con to get Pansy off his back. Threatening her would only provoke more of her anger. But ignoring her outright

seemed to bother her just as much.

In the meantime, however, Dazai would really like to stop having stones thrown at him.

“If you throw another one, I’ll do to you what I did to that cat,” Dazai said cheerfully.

Which is to say: I won’t do anything to you. But you don’t know that.

But the words had their intended effect. Both Millicent and Tracey screeched. All the pompous confidence they’d held seconds before crumbled immediately under the pseudo-threat. Without even a second of hesitation, they both dropped all of their stones at once. The rocks fell into an ugly heap.

“Tell Pansy...” Dazai paused, trying to think of what he wanted to say to the girl. He brought a hand to his chin in thought, but stopped upon remember the blood there. Instead, he wiped the back of his glove against the open cut, smearing it about his face messily. *“Hmm.* Tell her,” he cleared his throat and put a chipper hum in his voice:

“’I couldn’t care less about you and I’m too busy doing important things to be getting smacked around by your pets all the time! Please keep your self-worth issues to yourself. Much love, Dazai.’”

Millicent and Tracey blinked rapidly as they took in Dazai’s request.

“Did you get that?” Dazai asked. “I won’t repeat it. I really am busy, you know.”

They continued to stare at him for a long moment.

Dazai sighed. There was really no getting through to idiots like this.

Hmm...

An epiphany suddenly struck Dazai. He leaned down to snatch one of the thrown rocks from the ground.

Then, without warning, he arched his arm back and threw.

As was generally the case in the Port Mafia: *violence is the easiest solution.*

The air cracked with the force of his throw.

A second later, a loud *smack!* filled the air.

“Ow!”

Tracey stumbled back quite a few steps, fear and pain shooting through her expression. Dazai’s stone had smacked right between the girl’s eyes—a raw, red cut starting to cry blood down her face. It poured around her nose and clung to her chin. Tracey brought both her hands to the wound, tears in her eyes.

“Y-y-you—” Tracey shook.

Dazai clapped enthusiastically, but it only had Millicent and Tracey flinching. “I got a bullseye! Does that mean I win a prize?”

They stared at him, looking terrified.

“No prize, then,” Dazai huffed. Oh well. At least they were paying attention again. “Don’t forget to pass my message on. The less time I spend thinking about Pansy, the better...”

“Y-you aren’t going to... y’know...”

Dazai blinked. “Kill you? Or—petrify you. Whatever.”

Millicent squeaked.

“I hadn’t been planning on it, but you *are* really annoying...” he trailed off, enjoying the sudden looks of horror staring back at him. After nearly a minute, Dazai broke out into gleeful cackles. He gave a toothy grin. “Just kidding.”

Somehow, Millicent and Tracey only looked more horrified upon hearing this.

These two were no fun at all...

Well, they were kind of fun to mess with once you got past the *Pansy of it all.*

Thinking their conversation well-enough over with, Dazai spun on his heels to leave.

It was only when Dazai started to walk away again that those two regained their bearings.

Millicent harshly elbowed Tracey in the ribs. She grunted, but a second later was well enough to scamper away, still clutching at her bleeding head. Millicent was only a half-step behind her.

Dazai watched them go. Alone, the glee in his face melted away.

He sighed, tired.

If anyone were to look now, they wouldn’t recognize the giddy monster from seconds before. Instead, they would see dull eyes and a blank frown. Dazai expression was not at all dissimilar to the rocks now scattered at his feet. Stoney. Inanimate.

It was easy to enjoy his time at Hogwarts.

It was just as easy to hate it.

As he’d told McGonagall earlier, this whole year was shaping up to be a real hassle. He’d thought the same thing about last year, too.

Dazai hated this odd middle ground between good and bad. The soft morality of it all. Good —because he was doing exactly what Mori wanted for the betterment of the Port Mafia. And

bad—the so-called Demon Student. It was easier, last year, to just be nobody. Instead, he was the ribbed side of a coin caught between heads and tails.

Perhaps that was why Mori was content to throw him into the deep end. Or, more likely, Mori was just scheming.

Dazai's hand reached for the knife that now rested safely in Blaise's pocket.

The blood on Dazai's cheek was already congealed and drying. None of the other wounds had bled, but Dazai was certain each of them would bruise. He was lucky neither Millicent nor Tracey had gone through with casting a jinx at him. Dazai really didn't need two nobodies knowing about No Longer Human. *Especially* two nobodies who enjoyed Pansy's company.

Dazai exited the courtyard with another long sigh. The wind rustling his hair disappeared at his back.

A few people were milling about inside. He ignored them.

As Dazai entered the hall, he wondered if he could just shelf the Pansy Problem for a while. Focus his efforts on Lucius' test and let Pansy wreak her vengeance unencumbered in the meantime. He could manage a little light bullying just fine as long as Mori's job was being completed.

Hmm...

When Dazai looked up from his feet, he saw the hallway empty around him. As if, merely by entering, everyone in the building had hastily vacated. Dazai looked back to the floor.

At least alone Dazai would have time to cobble together a plan.

He closed his eyes to feel for the beast's magical signature again, but felt only latent magic coursing through the corridor like a bird of prey.

-

"You are certain the boy is innocent?"

Severus glowered, disliking Albus' tone immediately. "Poppy was correct in saying Mr. Dazai is physically incapable of performing this caliber of spell. He couldn't have petrified Mrs. Norris without rendering himself worthy of a week-long hospital stay."

Albus tilted his head, considering this. Then, "but he could have written the bloody message."

Severus felt his eyes narrow. "I do not believe that to be the case, Albus."

“But it is *possible,”* he reiterated.

Evidently sensing that Severus was about to bark something he couldn’t take back, Minerva abruptly cut in.

“He did have blood on his hand when I arrived. Although it could be explained away by the boy’s own testimony of events, if that is to be believed.” Minerva spoke slowly, placating. “Though why Mr. Dazai felt the need to investigate the crime scene is beyond me.”

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose, simultaneously calming his frayed nerves and loosing some exasperation at his problem child. “You were less involved in the investigation into the Philosopher’s Stone last year, Minerva. I assure you, this nosiness is *completely* in character for that boy.”

Unfortunately. Severus was already mentally preparing to reign Dazai in should he decide to poke around anymore than he already had. If last year was any indication, such preparations were *more* than necessary.

Minerva shot him a questioning look before shaking her head. She turned back to Albus.

“Regardless of that, this whole situation has everyone on edge. Students and staff alike. We’ll need to make a formal statement before someone leaks the story to the press.”

The headmaster had, after dispelling the other staff, returned to his seat behind the desk. He rested his chin on two bridged hands, eyes silently regarding the spot Dazai had been sitting at earlier. “That would be in our best interest.”

When Albus didn’t expand, Severus snapped an impatient, “without investigating further, we have nothing but theory to give the Daily Prophet.”

“It will have to do,” Albus said. Finally, he tore his eyes away from Dazai’s chair, looking pensive. “I will draft a letter to them shortly.”

Minerva nodded. “In the meantime?”

“In the meantime, we will need to focus our investigation. If the Chamber of Secrets is truly open, then we need to begin our investigation where the previous one left off. Severus, I will leave this to you.”

Severus blinked, then immediately bristled. If he was looking into the Chamber of Secrets, then that meant—

“Minerva, you will be investigating Mr. Dazai.”

“You can’t be serious!” Severus practically shouted before Minerva could even get a single word in. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides, a burning anger coursing through him. “I’ve been looking into that boy for months now!”

Albus eyed him. Minerva did the same, though with a bit more surprise in her eyes at the sudden outburst.

“Exactly why I believe it would be better put in Minerva’s hands. You have found practically nothing to show for your efforts.” Albus paused, clearly waiting for the potion master to see reason. But when that anger didn’t ebb, Albus added a chiding, “You’ve gotten too attached to him, Severus. It is clouding your judgement.”

Severus growled, but couldn’t bring himself to deny the claim.

Albus seemed to easily read that reproach. He ignored Severus again in favor of instructing Minerva, “I’d like you to keep an eye on Mr. Dazai. If he is the culprit—or is associated with the culprit—he will not lay low for long.”

Minerva agreed, stoic. “Anything in particular I should be looking for?”

“Anything unusual for a twelve-year-old... though he is such a curious child already,” Albus answered amusedly. He shook his head. “At this point, I suspect finding even the slightest of reasons to expel the boy would satisfy the public.” He paused. “Of course, I don’t aim to expel Mr. Dazai. But report back to me immediately should you witness something to warrant it.”

“I’ll keep watch for anything of the sort.” She paused. The furrow in Minerva’s expression told Severus that she was debating over what to say next. Uncertain as to what response would yield the best results.

After a short moment, Minerva finally asked, “Last year, Mr. Dazai cited the Death Eaters were involved in the theft of the Philosopher’s Stone, did he not?" She leveled Albus with a steady, unwavering look. Severus could appreciate Minerva’s inflexible tone. “What is the likelihood that’s the case again now?”

It looked as though something had suddenly soured in Albus’ mouth. “Unfortunately, not as low as I would like. All the more reason to watch Mr. Dazai’s every move.”

“He’s a *victim* of the Death Eaters, not *one of them,”* Severus snapped. “And if you had included about the Death Eaters in your original report last year, we might not be in this situation now.”

Though Minerva shot him a briefly guilty look, Albus merely nodded. He didn’t look abashed even slightly.

“You know as well as I, Severus, that the boy is adept at keeping secrets.”

Severus didn’t miss how Albus completely steamrolled his second objection.

The fact that Dazai had gone nearly an entire year investigating the Philosopher’s Stone in *secret* had not stopped nagging at Severus’ brain since he found out.

Yes—Dazai was good at keeping secrets. But that didn’t mean he was complicit in anything further than being a nosey brat.

Severus had seen how the boy could panic, or draw into himself, or sneak around well past curfew. And though that was all concerning in its own right, Severus had stopped finding it

outright suspicious quite a long time ago. ‘Worrying,’ was the word Severus would use.

Dazai Osamu was worrying because he was a *threat to himself*—and not to everyone else, and the Daily Prophet would lead you to believe.

“Minerva,” Albus continued, either not noticing or not caring about Severus’ mental tangent, “I am not asking you to dig too deeply into the boy’s past. As much as I find his repeated involvement curious, Severus and Poppy are correct in saying he is too young and too inexperienced to perform the sort of feats he is suspected of.”

Severus almost barked out a correction that it wasn’t Dazai’s *youth* holding him back, rather his *health*, but he bit his tongue at the last second before speaking.

Albus continued, “But I see no reason why the boy couldn’t still be involved in some manner. Minerva, I’m asking you to keep a close watch on him. Perhaps you could ask one of your prefects to follow him between classes.”

“That’s a lot to ask of a student,” Minerva calmly objected.

“These are unusual times,” was all Albus said in response.

Minerva narrowed her eyes, but said nothing. Severus felt himself doing the same. His typical biting remark about how worthless Albus’ “Bigger Picture” stayed locked behind his lips.

Albus sighed. He leaned back into his seat with a grunt.

Then, he turned his gaze solely onto Severus. “Have you any more news of Yokohama?”

Severus’ spine snapped straight and a shutter closed over his expression. His conversation with Poppy the other day echoed through his head.

Almost like another magical community...

“No.”

Albus raised a brow, the disbelief and surprise clear across his face. “No?”

Severus shook his head jerkily. “My inquiries have all been rejected. I’m led to believe Yokohama is simply less welcoming of outsiders than what other cities we’ve dealt with in the past have been.”

Albus frowned. The information clearly had caught his interest.

“Yokohama?” Minerva asked.

“The city Dazai lives in when not at Hogwarts.” Severus paused, deciding on how much he should say. Eventually, he decided it was best to let Minerva know of his most pressing suspicions. If she was going to be investigating Dazai from here on out, Severus needed her

to proceed with this one thing in mind. “I strongly suspect his home life to be unsuitable, and had reached out to Yokohama inquiring as much.”

“Unsuitable...” Minerva echoed quietly.

The second she realized what Severus meant, her expression and tone turned deeply serious. “You don’t mean he’s being abused?!”

“I don’t know. And Yokohama officials are less than forthcoming.” He grumbled. “If you aim to begin your investigation with that city, I simply advise that you *don’t.* You’d learn more about Yokohama taking wild guesses than you would trying to ask a Yokohama citizen about the place they live.”

Minerva whirled on Albus, only to find his hand raised and silencing.

“A problem for another time,” he said, simply.

Minerva balked. She glanced to Severus, clearly looking for support, only to find his expression grim but silent.

Good, he thought. *She understands the severity of my suspicions. Hopefully, she won’t push my Problem Child too far.*

Then he immediately pinched himself for thinking such a sticky-sweet thought.

“According to Mr. Dazai, Yokohama has a fairly high crime rate,” Severus plowed onward hastily. “I double-checked. It mostly looks to be assault and theft, however. Low level muggle crimes with no indication of Death Eater activity.”

And no sign of *magic activity,* either. Which wasn’t something Severus had thought to be worried about until Poppy had dropped her epiphany on him like a thousand-pound stone.

Still, that Dazai had laughed at the suggestion of crime in Yokohama had struck Severus distinctly as being odd. Sure, Yokohama had crime. But it didn’t seem to be any more than anywhere else. He’d visited Yokohama—only to find the streets actionless and plain. But Dazai’s amusement had been palpable... once again giving Severus the impression that Dazai knew something more than he did.

When it came to Dazai Osamu, Severus always felt like he was missing something important. A thousand jigsaw pieces without a single clue as to how they fit together.

“Hm...” Albus hummed, eyes drifting to the side.

Severus followed his gaze to the window.

Leaves were blowing in a slight wind, still green with the dying ends of Spring. Within a few weeks, they would wither orange and red, then die altogether. They had barely even made it to Autumn, and everything had already gone to shit.

“Our opponent is being quite bold,” Albus said. Finally, he tore his eyes from the world outside and settled them firmly on Severus. “We need to stay one step ahead of them. The Chamber of Secrets opening is unfortunate, but not entirely unexpected. I’d like to identify the parties in play and move from there... Let’s not forget where our priorities lie.”

Severus glowered.

That’s easy enough to say, he thought bitterly, *but how do you win a game without knowing all the players?*

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It’s not that Dazai had no sense of direction. On the contrary, in fact, Dazai had a perfect sense for it. His memory was virtually infallible, on the off-chance he actually decided to pay attention enough to learn something in the first place.

No. The problem was that Hogwarts just didn’t make sense. Dazai was about half convinced that the latent magic around Hogwarts was telling the other students how to navigate the school, because it certainly wasn’t telling him anything.

Case in point: this hallway *definitely* led to the dungeons yesterday.

Probably.

...Maybe.

Dazai gave up on understanding it all a long time ago. At just about the same time he picked up a few loyal bodyguards to act as his guides.

Dazai turned another corner. It wasn’t the Slytherin dungeons—no surprise there—but maybe it was close. The air had grown a bit colder, at least. After nearly ten minutes of fruitless wandering, Dazai had started going down every staircase he found. The dungeons were down.

...he’d find it eventually.

In the meantime, all this wandering gave Dazai time to think. And just as Dazai had decided the best course of action was going down, he’d also decided the next best step was finding Draco.

If the petrification of Mrs. Norris really was Lucius’ test, Draco was Dazai’s best lead.

Dazai kicked around another corner he vaguely recognized. The cracked, cold stone walls made him think this was probably nearer to the Slytherin common room than not. He quietly felt around for any sign of magic, but felt nothing other than the usual.

No sign of the magic lock keeping the Slytherin rooms shut.

No sign of that magical creature, either.

Dazai sighed.

"—didn't you hear?"

He perked up. It had been a few minutes since he'd come across any signs of life. This was promising! Dazai might have to threaten them a bit, but it would be well worth it in return for directions.

"You used to be his friend, right?" Someone asked, sounding uncertain. *"I can't even imagine it..."*

"Scary..."

Someone huffed. *"Don't call him my friend. I was trying to make him fit into Slytherin, but some people are just unfixable."*

Dazai paused for only a brief second before suddenly skipping forward at twice-speed.

He *knew* that voice!

He hurried around the next corner, eyes already wide and searching for the source of conversation. And—

...there!

"Draco!" Dazai called, waving his arms over his head in an enthusiastic greeting.

Draco jumped.

His wide-eyes immediately found Dazai, speedily approaching from the other end of the hall. He shot a quick, almost desperate, look to both of his companions (two second-year Slytherins Dazai recognized from class).

Dazai ignored the frantic expression on Draco's face in favor of saddling up beside him.

"Daz—" Draco stepped away from him. At his side, the other Slytherins bristled. "I don't know why you're looking for me, but *I don't associate with your type."* Draco spoke slowly and pointedly, as if his eyes weren't already screaming at Dazai to just leave him alone!

Dazai nodded, having already expected that sort of reaction. It didn't stop him from looping his and Draco's arms together. "Right, right. But I'm a low-life demon, so I don't really listen to those types of requests!"

Draco sputtered. "You can't just—!"

"I can and I am!"

Wide-eyed, Draco turned back to his other friends, who seemed caught between attacking Dazai where he stood and cowering in fear. They stared at Draco as if asking what to do.

Draco whipped back to Dazai and whispered, *"Dazai! What are you doing?!"*

Dazai shrugged, and the motion pulled Draco forward a step.

Deciding that was fine, Dazai gave Draco another shove and started marching him down the hall. "I need to borrow some of your Malfoy wisdom! Because I'm such a horrible demon who isn't your friend at all. *Blah, blah—oh.* They left."

Draco blinked rapidly as he tried to make sense of Dazai's nonsense.

Then he glanced over his shoulder.

Sure enough, Draco's two friends had scampered off the second Dazai decided to just steal Draco outright. He caught the tail-end of their robes just before they vanished behind a nearby door.

"Now that it's just us—"

"What are you thinking?" Draco shook himself free of Dazai's hold. The mafioso let him, only wearing a small pout at the action. "I thought I made it clear that I can't be seen associating with you in public!"

"I wouldn't really call this associating." Dazai stroked his chin thoughtfully. "From their perspective, it was really more of a kidnapping."

Draco groaned. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I can't believe you. Aren't you supposed to be trying to stay out of trouble?"

"I'd say the ship has sailed on that one, Draco."

Judging by the way Draco's entire face seemed to twist, news of Mrs. Norris had already spread to this side of the school, too.

That wasn't unexpected. But it did mean that Dazai should try to avoid lingering if possible.

"Where's our office, relative to... where ever here is?"

Draco stared at him for a long moment.

Finally, he sighed. "Come on," he said, grabbing Dazai's arm and pulling him in the opposite direction the other Slytherins had gone. "We aren't even close, idiot."

Dazai puffed, but didn't break free from the hold. "That's no way to call your boss, Draco."

"You aren't my boss until we're in the office. Until then, I thought you were kidnapping me."

"Ah!" Dazai clapped. "I am!"

He chuckled, and Draco led him through the long halls of Hogwarts. The body pressed up against Dazai was a steady weight. Unwittingly, Dazai let out a small, relieved sigh even as Draco's fingers gripped him hard enough to bruise.

It was... odd.

The feeling of warmth on his side wasn't unfamiliar. Ever since he started his schooling here, Dazai had been growing more-and-more used to having a companion with him at all times. Still, Dazai forced himself not to dwell on the realization of how much he liked having Draco with him. Of how quickly his mood had changed upon seeing his friend.

It wasn't becoming of a mafioso. Mori would say something like that. *Had* said something like that.

"What happened?"

Dazai blinked out of his souring thoughts. He turned a questioning eye to Draco.

"Huh? I assumed everyone had heard about Mrs. Norris by now," he said.

Draco's expression briefly darkened, but he shook it off a second later. "Not that," he scowled. Draco pointed to his cheek with the hand not currently wrapped around Dazai's elbow. "What happened to your face?"

Oh. Dazai brought his own hand up to the cut. Dried blood chipped off at the touch. it had stopped bleeding some time ago and no longer stung, but he supposed it still made for a frightening picture. "Ran into some friends of Pansy."

In response, Draco's face did something indescribable. It seemed to twist painfully. Dazai marveled at the expression.

"Did you know she's making her own little gang? It even has some members outside of Slytherin!" Dazai chirped over Draco's internal dilemma. "You know she always hated that I associated with Gryffindors. She's turned into a hypocrite while I wasn't watching, Draco!"

"I didn't think she would..."

"Make friends?" Dazai asked, cheeky.

Draco shot him a look. "Attack you," he snarled. He motioned Dazai towards a staircase. "I know she's been meeting with people to talk about the Demon Student story. I've been there a few times, when she did. But they never mentioned actually doing something about it."

Dazai raised a brow. "There's no accounting for people like Pansy," he hummed. "I knew it was a possibility, anyway."

"Then you should have told me," Draco said. "I have sway in Slytherin. I would have made sure no one took things too far." Again, his eyes flashed to Dazai's cheek. He turned away a second later, looking guilty.

Dazai made another attempt to wipe the blood away. But without a mirror, Dazai had no idea how successful the effort was.

“And ruin Lucius’ plan to keep the Malfoy name clean? I’d rather not annoy your father too terribly, Draco. Anyway, Pansy’s little gang seems to include students from every house. I doubt your Slytherin charm will do anyone much good there.”

The look Draco gave him didn’t seem especially appeased, but Dazai paid it no mind. Instead, his eyes flicked to the other end of the hall. A few people were gathered there, but they hadn’t noticed Dazai or Draco yet.

“The office is just around that corner, right?” He asked quietly.

As soon as Draco nodded, Dazai slid out of Draco’s grasp.

In one fluid motion, he flipped their positions.

Dazai clutched Draco’s arm tightly. He tugged on the limb, forcing Draco to stumble a full step. Dazai didn’t let up. He dragged a loudly protesting Draco behind him.

“Hey! Don’t pull so—!”

All the shouting captured the other students’ attention.

They took in the scene with wide, frightened eyes: the Demon Student harshly pulling along Draco Malfoy.

Dazai knew, to their eyes, this scene could only be seen as the Demon taking another victim.

Draco was clearly being pulled against his will. The Malfoy name wouldn’t be stained. No one could possibly misconstrue this as Draco associating with Dazai freely.

Like he’d said: *kidnapping*.

The students shakingly scrambled to run away. Dazai only released Draco’s wrist once they were well out of the hall.

Draco huffed and rubbed his wrist. “Was that really necessary?”

Dazai ignored him. Instead, he ambled over to the wall, where a door was slowly forming on what was once a blank canvas. He swung the door open and let himself inside. A second later, Draco followed before closing it at their backs.

Dazai did a cursory glance around the room.

Egg was sleeping on the sofa, each snore punctuated by a puff of ashy smoke out her nostrils. With No Longer Human, Dazai obviously couldn’t sit beside the dragon. He walked to the desk instead, aiming to sit in the chair behind it. Before he could, however, something else caught his eye.

On the wall opposite the sofa, a mirror was hanging on the wall. Below it was a small table.

Dazai beelined to investigate.

Draco eyed him, but didn't make to follow. He crossed his arms and stood by the desk instead.

The mirror was shiny—and clearly new. At least Dazai didn't remember it being here last time. But the constant, overwhelming flow of magic in this room kept him from his curiosity. Everything about the office could be written off with magic. Dazai didn't need any explanation further than that.

But for a split second, Dazai didn't see an ordinary wall mirror.

He saw the Mirror of Erised.

He saw *nothing.*

No reflection. No dreams, or desires. Not even himself.

Nothing in this world will ever make me happy.

Dazai scrunched up his eyes, tight. When he blinked them open again, the mirror was its usual self once more. A plain sheet of glass. A weary and familiar face staring back at him.

He looked away.

The table was interesting. Giving it a closer look, Dazai saw a freshly stocked first-aid kit atop it.

"Wash your face," Draco called from across the room, unknowing of how Dazai's chest had tightened with a coil of unease. "It's unsettling."

Dazai met Draco's eyes through the mirror first. Then he glanced to his own face.

His eyes were black holes, underlined by heavy, dark shadows. The exhaustion in Dazai's face was all too obvious. He hadn't been getting much sleep since school started. Given today's events... Dazai wasn't sure if he was going to sleep at all.

But he was *there*. Dazai had a reflection.

That clearly wasn't what Draco was talking about, though.

Sure enough, Dazai's half-hearted wiping hadn't clean the blood from his face at all. The brown stain of dried blood covered his entire right side of his face. It was smeared grossly under his eye.

No wonder people were running away from him. Dazai was starting to look like the demon everyone thought he was!

Dazai plucked a wipe from the kit and started rubbing at his face.

“How come the magic room gives you everything you ask for, Draco?”

“Just say thank you for the mirror, idiot.” Draco paused abruptly. A second later, he grudgingly corrected, “Boss.”

Dazai gave his cheek a final wash with the wipe. At some point, his rough treatment had reopened the cut. Before it could start bleeding too badly, however, Dazai grabbed a butterfly bandage from the box and hastily covered it over. He checked himself in the mirror one last time before whirling to face Draco.

“Better?”

“Much,” Draco deadpanned.

Dazai hopped up onto the desk.

After a brief hesitation, Draco sat beside him.

It was silent for only a moment, Egg’s smoky snores a wheezy sound to fill the gap. Then,

“I know your father doesn’t fill you in on much,” Dazai said abruptly. Draco stiffened, but otherwise didn’t look surprised. He had to have known this conversation was coming after Dazai dragged him away from his friends, after all. “But I have to ask: does this seem like something Lucius would do?”

The petrification, the Chamber of Secrets, the panic.

Draco watched the floor. When Dazai tried to meet his eyes under a brush of silver hair, the other snake turned to look at Egg instead.

“I don’t know. Maybe,” Draco said, clearly hesitant. “He isn’t opposed to... dangerous things. To get what he wants.”

Dazai hummed.

Giving up on catching Draco’s eye, Dazai leaned back into his palms and stared up at the ceiling. “It seemed like too much of a coincidence to me, too,” Dazai said, carefully not telling Draco that the Port Mafia ascribed to similar tendencies. He kicked his legs out childishly. *“Ahh,* what a bother. I was a little hoping Lucius’ test would be something I could do undercover. But five seconds in and I’m already the face of Mrs. Norris’ petrification.”

Draco jolted up.

Dazai met his startled gaze with a patient stare.

“Petri—she isn’t dead?!”

Dazai blinked. Suddenly, he remembered what Millicent and Tracey had said earlier:

‘You killed Mrs. Norris!’

So not only did everyone have the wrong culprit in mind, they also had the wrong crime. Though Dazai could hardly blame them, seeing as he'd come to the same conclusion initially as well.

“Nope!” Dazai said with faux-cheer. “I’m sure the real story will catch on eventually, but maybe you could use some of your Slytherin charm to inform the masses.” That might keep Gemma off his back for a while, at least. Wherever the prefect was, Dazai was sure she was fuming over this turn of events.

“But that means you *couldn’t* have been the one to attack Mrs. Norris!”

“That’s exactly what Madam Pomfrey said!” Dazai said enthusiastically. “Good luck getting anyone else to see reason, though.”

Draco’s lip curled.

“It’s fine.” This time, it was Dazai who tore his gaze away. He looked to the mirror, briefly, then decided he’d rather not see those empty, tired eyes staring back at him and looked at the wall instead. “I’ll just have to shape my movements accordingly.”

Merlin knows sneaking around is going to be useless this year, even if it got me through the entirety of the last one.

“Your reputation is six-feet underground! How are you so casual?” Draco had a wild look in his eyes and his fingers splayed over his lap.

Dazai eyed him for a short moment before smiling. “I guess to a Malfoy, something like that is very important.”

It was important in the mafia, too. Although Port Mafia members tended to actually prefer reputations like the one Dazai had accrued here. When people thought you were dangerous, you *were*. And you *wanted to be*—it was no lie that fear was a fantastic motivator, as Mori had told him all those weeks ago. Although Dazai, either stuck in his room or shipped away on this secret job, had considered having no reputation to perhaps be superior.

Too late now, he supposed.

“The Malfoy name holds *weight,”* Draco emphasized pointedly.

Dazai nodded. Then, turning suddenly serious, he said, “hence why I need to figure out Lucius’ test sooner than later. Your father is trying to decide which horse to back: the Death Eaters or the Port Mafia. If he makes the wrong choice, your Malfoy name is going to be right beside my reputation.”

Six-feet under.

Draco’s lip pressed into a thin, white line.

“I have a few leads,” Dazai said when it became obvious Draco wasn’t going to say anything. “Things I need to research. You’re welcome to tag along, if you want.”

Draco glanced to him. There was something distinctly tense in his jaw, and he looked uncomfortable with this turn of the conversation. “Isn’t that more Hermione’s job?”

Dazai chuckled. “The two of you are getting along, then?”

“I—*no!”* He protested. “But everyone knows she’s the bookworm. For a lousy Gryffindor, she’s actually fairly smart... I suppose.”

Dazai made a point to roll his eyes, earning a searing glare in return. He waved Draco off. “Draco is my partner in crime for this one,” he said simply. “Besides, Hermione and the others are busy with the test-answer-selling schemes.” Though Dazai supposed a few questions here-and-there couldn’t hurt. Short of explaining the Port Mafia and Lucius’ test—something Dazai in no way wanted to do—that was probably the most use Dazai would get out of Hermione.

He shook away the idea. “Forget about that, Draco. The library research is secondary this time.”

Draco blinked, clearly surprised. *“Wha*—how?”

“First things first: what do we know about today’s incident?” Dazai spoke slowly, making sure to get his thoughts in proper order before continuing. Draco watched him expectantly. “One: Mrs. Norris was petrified—probably by the magical creature living in the walls.”

“The what?!”

“Two: A message was left behind at the scene, mentioning something called the Chamber of Secrets. The professors know what that means, but don’t want to share.” Dazai counted off on his fingers. “And three: when I arrived at the scene, no one else was there, despite the message having only been painted moments before. The first people to arrive after were students.”

It was silent for a second before Draco seemed to realize Dazai was finished.

He cleared his throat. “We need to research what the creature and the Chamber are,” Draco surmised. “And...”

Dazai raised a brow, waiting.

It was only a second later Dazai saw the shock of realization alight Draco’s features.

“You think the culprit was among the first students to arrive?!”

“Fred and George have shown me every hidden passage in Hogwarts, and there isn’t one anywhere near that hallway,” Dazai explained. “For the culprit to have just narrowly missed me, they couldn’t have made it far. Meaning they probably ran straight into the crowd. If they

wanted to keep their cover, they would have been forced to join the crowd, rather than try to sneak past it."

"That makes this easier..." Draco's frown twitched. "Who was there?"

Dazai beamed so brightly that Draco winced.

"That's where you come in, loyal subordinate!"

Draco's lip curled in a sneer, but it fell apart less than a second later. Something heavy flashed in his eyes and he dipped his head again.

Dazai faltered.

Guilt. Draco looked guilty.

But Dazai was certain Draco wasn't the culprit. Which meant this guilt ran deeper. It was the same expression Draco had worn during their last conversation in this room—talking about what kind of person Lucius really was.

Dazai needed to plow onward, regardless. He didn't really have time to deep dive into Draco's current internal crisis. He also didn't want to.

"Lucius isn't on campus," Dazai said carefully. He waited for Draco to lift his head again before continuing, "which means he set today's incident into action some time before school started. Some time between the end of last year and the start of this one, Lucius worked a student under his thumb."

Something in Draco's expression twisted at Daza's harsh turn of phrase.

Dazai didn't allow himself to feel guilty for it. He'd rather have Draco at *his* side than at *Lucius'*.

"Draco," he met the other boy's eyes, "in that span of time, who has your father been in contact with?"

Draco stared, his usually self-assured expression now mottled with uncertainty. Dazai knew such an expression would have shocked him more, had he not seen Lucius and his son interact in person. Had he not seen it on *himself*, on occasion.

"I don't know," Draco said.

"I know Lucius tends to not include you on these things." Dazai ignored the way Draco's brows pulled upon hearing that. "But that doesn't mean you don't want to be included. Even if he doesn't ask, you've been paying attention, haven't you?"

"I don't know," Draco emphasized. "He doesn't tell me anything."

"Well, *I'm* telling you: Lucius orchestrated today's attack then so that I can solve it now." Dazai rapped a knuckle against the desk. "He never said asking you for help was off-limits."

Draco slumped, none of his regal upbringing showing in his posture now.

A crackle of stained glass lit the office up blue and red. Dazai leaned into the warmth.

Egg woke slowly on the sofa. She looked around, eyes briefly landing on Draco and Dazai before sluggishly falling away. She hopped off the sofa with a flap of her wings.

Her claws clacked against the floor as she walked to a sunny, red glass-stained patch on the floor, where she curled back up to sleep under the warmth.

“My father is busy. He has a lot of meetings.”

Dazai blinked away from Egg to find Draco solemnly tracking the dragon’s movements as well.

Draco sighed. At the same time, Egg puffed out an unusually large ball of ashy smoke.

“A lot of important people want to meet with my family to ask for favors or to get a grasp on... on how the political tides are turning. But *they* come to *him*. The only time we left the house all summer was once for a charity gala, then again to meet you at Diagon Alley.”

Dazai hummed. “Do any of these important people currently have kids at Hogwarts?”

“Of course they do,” Draco grumbled. “Most of them Slytherin.”

Silently, Dazai recalled today’s incident to his mind’s eye. The students in the crowd... some of them had been Slytherin.

He turned to look Draco in the eye, but Draco was already listing names off without the need for extra prompting.

“Theodore Nott, Millicent Bullstrode, Tracey Davis, Crabbe, Goyle...” he paused. “Pansy.”

Dazai sat up. “Pansy was there?” Actually... “Millicent and Tracey too?”

Draco shot him a glance. “Pansy and I hung out while her mother schmoozed with my father.” He made a face. “I didn’t realize you were friends with those two, though.”

“We’ve only met. They’re in Pansy’s...” Dazai frowned. “Anti-Dazai gang.”

Dazai huffed, considering that. Sure enough, he’d seen Pansy’s face among the crowd earlier. And though Dazai didn’t think he’d ever held a conversation with Nott he could recognize the boy’s face. Yes. He’d been among the crowd.

At the very least, Dazai was certain that Millicent and Tracey had only found out about Mrs. Norris after the fact. He hadn’t seen them at the scene, and based on what they’d said, they had heard about it sometime later. As for Crabbe and Goyle... though Dazai had seen at least half of their duo among the crowd, he severely doubted they had the brains to pull something like this off.

That meant...

Two names for two suspects.

Although, Dazai thought with a frown, *if Lucius made his connection at Flourish and Blotts, that adds dozens of names to the list.*

Okay.

So two names for possibly more than two suspects.

“Professor Lockhart was at the gala as well,” Draco said suddenly.

Dazai jolted out of his thoughts. “What?”

“Not for long. My father really can’t stand him, and I think Professor Lockhart got the feeling he wasn’t wanted after the first twenty minutes,” Draco explained. “Father may not like him, but as a celebrity, an invitation was extended regardless.”

Well then... *three names and probably more than three suspects.*

His list was getting a little unwieldy.

Lockhart may not have been among the crowd, but as a professor he wasn’t as limited in his movements. Moreover, Dazai remembered seeing him nearby just moments before finding Mrs. Norris himself.

More than that, Dazai really didn’t like the man. Finding him guilty would make Dazai’s entire year.

“Ah... do you think a Defense professor could be evil two years in a row?” Dazai joked.

Draco’s slumped figure froze for a second. Then, quietly, a small laugh broke from his lungs. “Don’t jinx it, Boss.”

“I’m not! It’s only that Lockhart is already so awful, it’s not much of a stretch.”

“As long as you don’t try and convince me about some phony wizard mafia theory again!” Draco started to laugh, but then abruptly realized what he’d said and clamped his mouth firmly shut.

Dazai *did* laugh. “Even *I* couldn’t make that leap, Draco. Lockhart is spineless! He has all the backbone of a wet noodle, and none of the necessary menacing aura.”

Now, Draco did snort. “And Quirrell *did?”*

“It was a subtle thing! Once you got past all the stuttering and almost-crying, Quirrell was a scary guy!”

“Still—”

Suddenly, the door flew open.

It banged against the wall with the force, rattling the stone.

Draco flinched at the sound.

Beside him, Dazai jumped off the desk and shifted his feet into a defensive stance.

Even Egg, in her patch of sunlight, bolted awake. She flew into the rafters above in a trail of startled smoke.

“Dazai!” Fred and George shouted, eyes looking around wildly. When they found Dazai, the twins let out a leaden sigh of relief. *“Oh,* thank Merlin. When we heard what happened and couldn’t find you on the map...”

Dazai melted the tension from his shoulders forcibly, and drew an accommodating smile onto his face. Draco gave him an odd look, but Dazai brushed it off.

“It’s—” Hermione cut herself off upon entering the room. “I told you he would be in here.”

“You worry too much about him.” Ron said, arriving in-step with Hermione. Despite his words, Dazai saw clear relief in how Ron’s shoulders slumped upon seeing him.

Fred and George ignored the barb, already hurrying across the office to look Dazai over.

While those two fussed over him, Dazai waved hello to Blaise, who was shutting the door quietly behind everyone. Blaise smiled while looking him up-and-down searchingly.

“Hey, what’s this?” Fred said suddenly.

George’s finger hovered just shy of poking into his cheek.

Dazai smacked the hand away. Though the twins let it happen, their asking eyes didn’t lose any of their intensity.

“Some Slytherins making trouble,” Draco said before Dazai could get a word in. Everyone turned to him. “I won’t be letting them get away with it.”

Fred and George ooh-ed, amusement lighting their expressions. “Going to sick big-bad Mr. Malfoy on them?”

“I—” Draco froze. Something dark and uncertain warred in his expression. “No, I’m...”

Given their previous conversation, Dazai severely doubted Draco wanted to reach out to his father for something trivial like this.

Dazai took pity on him. “Everyone in Slytherin loves Draco! I’m sure if he asked nice enough, they’d learn to stay in their place.”

Fred and George made an appreciative sound at that, but still hadn't finished their fussing. Dazai made another attempt at brushing them off.

"So you all came running to see me, is that it?" he asked.

Ron huffed, a denial ready on his lips. But Blaise was already nodding in agreement before the Gryffindor could open his mouth.

"We heard what happened!" Hermione came forward, grasping both of Dazai's hands in her own. Dazai jumped at the unexpected touch, but didn't pull back. Still, Hermione seemed to notice his discomfort. She let go of him a second later. "About Mrs. Norris and the professors taking you somewhere! Is it all true?"

Knowing that it would be a long story, Dazai walked to the sofa and promptly blanketed himself across it.

Of course, he would have to leave out several key details (Lucius, Port Mafia, the fact that he would, in fact, be investigating the petrification). But he could give them the broad strokes. This was his gang, after all, and he thought they deserved at least a sliver of the truth.

But only bosses and their most trusted got to glimpse at the full picture. Hence why Dazai was at Hogwarts buried in half-truths while Mori stayed in his office back home, smiling over a joke untold.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading/commenting/etc. It means a lot! :)
happy birthday to yall! and see ya next week!!

next up: draco and pansy have a talk.

Covenant

Chapter Summary

Somehow, Lockhart doesn't realize every student in his class is cheating.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Perfect marks!” Lockhart exclaimed, a beaming smile splitting his face. As always, his teeth were shining. “Perfect marks all around! Well, almost.”

Dazai raised a brow, nonplussed as Lockhart’s eyes found him across the room. A few snickers sounded from around the class.

The test sitting in front of Dazai was marked at every question. A boldly written “0%” was scrawled across the top. It was neither a surprise nor a disappointment to Dazai. Most of the questions had been answered with one snide remark or another (“What spell did Lockhart use to defeat the troll?” being answered with “can you even do magic? Cast a spell or I won’t believe you”).

The other students seemed to find the whole affair quite amusing—probably thinking that Dazai was the only one among them not offered the stolen answer key.

Little did they know it was Dazai’s gang that had sold the answers to begin with.

In reality, Dazai had taken one look at the cheat sheet and shrugged it off. Though it was nice to taste the fruits of one's efforts, Dazai really didn’t want Lockhart to think he cared about this class. It didn’t really benefit him one way or the other, to cheat on this exam. Hell’s Hounds was in full motion after the heist—that was all Dazai really cared about.

The self-satisfied look on Lockhart’s face was a little regrettable, though.

“I’m keeping expectations for my grade low, Sir,” Dazai cheekily called as he leaned back into his seat. “If I score above an F, you’ll think too much of me.”

The room’s quiet laughter immediately died out. Lockhart’s grating smile flickered for only a second.

Beside Dazai, Blaise coughed to cover a laugh.

Lockhart sniffed. As quick as he whirled on Dazai, he now turned to address everyone else instead. Blaise and Dazai shared a knowing look at that.

“Full marks all around is very impressive!” Lockhart continued as though Dazai had never spoken at all. “You all must have studied my books thoroughly! Congratulations!”

Only a few students had the decency to look abashed at that.

Dazai knew for a fact that everyone in this class—save himself and Hermione—had cheated. He had the galleons in his office desk to prove it. Ron had promptly declared himself Bookkeeper upon seeing their boon and counted it all up for him. Then, he'd written the sum total on their blackboard and circled it twice.

Now, most of the students only stared ahead blankly. Dazai wasn’t the only one fed up with Lockhart’s sugary charm, it seemed.

“I’m so glad to see how beloved I am,” Lockhart continued, oblivious to the dead-eyed stares he was getting. Or, more accurately, the dead-eyed stares the wall was getting. “One really starts to wonder, when their last book sells 52 copies less than the previous one. 52! I counted! But between all of you there must be at least 52 new readers.”

Dazai was fairly certain that, as the year went on, Lockhart was actually losing readers. He didn’t think anyone could sit through a Lockhart lecture and not loose favor for the man.

“Make that 51.”

Again, everyone’s eyes snapped to Dazai. Even Blaise startled at the comment, turning a questioning frown to his friend—one that screamed *‘what do you think you’re doing?’*

Dazai pointedly ignored him in favor of watching Lockhart’s face twist up in annoyance.

He smothered it within the second, offering a superficial smile. “Of course, no one expects the villain of my story to buy it! That’s—”

“Since it’s about me, you’ll give me a copy for free, right?”

Lockhart’s mouth snapped shut with an audible click.

“It’d be rude not to,” Dazai plowed onward, enjoying the way Lockhart’s face was turning an angry shade of red. The other students had much less interesting expressions—ones torn between amusement and horror. Mostly horror. The petrification of Mrs. Norris was doing Dazai no favors on that front. “And as Champion of the People, Professor Lockhart would never think about doing something rude.”

“I—you—!”

Dazai raised a brow. Under the desk, Blaise’s knee bumped into his, asking.

Everyone looked between Dazai and Lockhart, as if anticipating an all-out duel to start any second. Dazai saw some students, Neville among them, cautiously ducking into their desks. Fortunately for them, Dazai *also* didn’t want to start something like that. He had enough trouble hiding No Longer Human from Pansy’s pesky gang.

“It’s not very becoming of the hero to start a fight,” Dazai drawled. He eyed Lockhart’s shaking frame, eyes falling to where he knew the professor kept his wand. “That’s the villain's job.”

The words seemed to shake something loose in Lockhart’s simmering expression. He pulled some of his usual charm back into his features, but it had little effect. Everyone had already seen him about to burst at the seams with anger. The only thing currently working in Lockhart’s favor was that everyone hated him significantly less than they hated Dazai.

“Yes, yes, of course I remain level-headed in the face of adversity!”

“Congratulations,” Dazai deadpanned.

Lockhart shot him a scathing, if sparkling, glance.

The class waited in tense silence, but Lockhart seemed to have moved past his anger. Mostly. Probably, Dazai thought he was mentally cataloguing their conversation as a worthwhile plot point in his novel.

‘The demon attempts to sew discord amongst students during lecture...’

Dazai internally shook himself. Damned be it for him to start narrating his life like one of Lockhart’s awful, rambling novels. He would sooner die.

After a few more floundering attempts to soothe his ego, Lockhart dismissed class for lunch.

The students hurried out, not blind to the lingering trouble brewing between Lockhart and Dazai. For his part, Dazai hung back. He wanted to avoid the crowd, where possible. True to character, Blaise waited with him.

Dazai watched as Draco and Pansy left side-by-side. Just before he left, Draco met eyes with Dazai, then seemed to steel himself. He turned to Pansy and whispered something in her ear. A second later, they both left the classroom in the opposite direction of the other students.

Dazai eyed their departure before finally standing himself.

“You two are up to something,” Blaise noted, rising to his feet as well.

“Nothing important.”

Blaise gave him a blank look, whatever he was thinking behind that thoughtful mask impenetrable.

“I’d say our answer-key scheme was successful,” Dazai said, pointedly talking around Blaise’s inquiry. He waited until they were well out of the classroom before adding, “You did a good job finding customers.”

Blaise was silent for a second, looking like he wanted to say something. But in the end, he merely sighed. “Professor Lockhart didn’t even suspect cheating,” he said, though he sounded neither surprised nor excited about this turn of events.

“Between *‘everyone loves me so much they studied my books to death,’* and *‘no one could even bring themself to open the front page, so they cheated’* Lockhart was obviously going to think the former.” Dazai paused. “Alternatively, he might be pleased if we told him that I sold the answers. More content for his book.”

Blaise made a face at that.

Dazai nodded, equally unamused by Lockhart’s morbid interest in him.

They walked in silence for a moment, all the while Blaise kept his gaze firmly on Dazai. Fed up with all the eyes constantly on him lately, Dazai turned an expectant moue onto his friend.

Blaise didn't look at all ashamed to have been caught. But he did finally speak his mind. “I thought you wanted to lay low.” He dropped his tone as they walked past a group of whispering Ravenclaws. “Starting fights with Professor Lockhart is not laying low.”

“I think the ship has well sailed on that one, Blaise.”

“Hm... It’s still dangerous, isn’t it? More than last year.”

Dazai cast him a frowning look before shaking his head. Blaise was right—though Dazai had quite a few Slytherin naysayers last year, he’d also had Draco to buffer their hate. But even the Malfoy name couldn’t temper the pressuring weight of all the Daily Prophet had to say about Dazai.

At this point, Dazai was more limited in options than he may have liked.

He waggled a finger playfully. Someone nearby squeaked, wide eyes staring at Dazai as if he were about to cast a spell with his index finger alone. “Think of it this way,” he said, dropping his finger to point it at the other student. He rolled his eyes when they hastily scampered away. “If I keep to myself like last year, everyone will think I’m an easy target. Try to chase me out.” *Like Pansy,* he silently added. Though, with any luck, Millicent and Tracey had passed on his message and she would leave him alone.

Dazai sighed. Somehow, he didn't believe it.

Blaise blinked, realization darkening his expression. "You’re going to lean into the demon persona.” His voice was flat, disapproval clear in his voice.

“No one will bother me if they think I’m liable to snap and kill them,” Dazai said. He turned to Blaise with a hurt frown. “What’s with that look? You don’t trust me?”

Blaise held his gaze. “I trust you just fine. It’s everyone else I’m worried about.” He paused, something thoughtful crossing his expression. “Is this really what you want?”

Now, it was Dazai's turn to give Blaise a judging look. “Of course I want them to leave me alone. I only want Blaise hanging around me, not everyone else who thinks I’m some kind of serial killer. They’re all so noisy.”

“That isn’t what I mean.”

Dazai waited for Blaise to explain.

When a long moment passed without any elaboration, Dazai pouted.

“Were you always this cryptic?”

“I just wonder,” Blaise answered vaguely. “If you really—”

Abruptly, Blaise cut himself off.

Dazai blinked several times at the sudden shift, pinching his brows together in question. “If I really *what?”*

Rather than explain, Blaise tilted his chin back. Dazai followed his gaze across the hall.

“I think you’re wanted,” Blaise said simply.

At the end of the hall, hurriedly walking towards them, Hermione and Ron were waving hello. Hermione didn’t look bothered by all the incredulous stares she was getting. Beside her, however, Ron looked to be debating running off. He didn’t, though. Ron stayed firmly, if uncertainly, with Hermione as they beckoned the Demon Student forward.

“Maybe they’re calling you?”

Blaise shot him a blank look. Dazai chuckled.

“Us, then,” Dazai decided.

Evidently satisfied with that, Blaise nodded. They walked in step with one another to where Hermione and Ron had stopped, waiting.

“What did you do?” Ron asked immediately upon their arrival.

Dazai’s brows lifted. Beside him, Blaise looked similarly perplexed.

“Huh? What’s Ron on about now?”

He’d been perfectly well behaved, thank you very much!

Ron shot him a pointed look. “My brother—Percy. He was asking me about you yesterday! So what did you do to upset a *prefect?”*

Dazai frowned. “I barely know that guy.”

“Maybe he’s been reading the Daily Prophet,” Blaise suggested candidly.

They shared a silence over that idea.

Then, Hermione crossed her arms. “I should hope a prefect isn’t blindly falling for those lies!” Dazai didn’t have it in him to explain the situation with Gemma. She continued, “Perhaps I’ll have a talk with Percy tonight.”

"Uh, there's probably no need," Ron meekly argued. Looking for a quick out to this sudden turn in conversation, he whirled on Dazai and Blaise. "Forget that, did you hear?"

Dazai blinked. "About?" This couldn't be about Mrs. Norris—not only was Dazai certain *everyone* had heard about that by now, but he was also very much involved in the whole ordeal. Had something else happened, then? Something to do with Percy, maybe? Dazai tried to keep his ears pricked for important events around Hogwarts, but it was a little more difficult now that people ran away before he could eavesdrop on their conversations. "Did something happen?"

And with that, all the tension of their previous conversation seemed to evaporate.

Nothing bad, Dazai realized. He felt himself relaxing minutely.

Abruptly, Hermione's face lit up into a brilliant smile and Ron, though he was flushing bright red, puffed out his chest.

"Well," Hermione said, clearly quite excited, "Ron, did you want to tell them? Or shall I?"

Ron coughed at the fanfare. "It's not *that* big of a deal, 'Mione."

"Of course it is!" She whirled onto Dazai and Blaise. "You should have seen him and Draco celebrating together. They were so excited, for a second I think they forgot they won't be on the same team!"

Dazai hummed, suddenly realizing what Hermione was referring to. He turned a friendly grin to Ron. "You both made the Quidditch team? Congrats!"

"Good job," Blaise told him. "You tried out for keeper, right?"

Ron shifted in place, face still a peachy shade of red. He nodded. "Thanks," he muttered. "I—*we* had a good coach."

Now, it was Hermione's turn to flush red. "You two are pretty easy to teach, once you stop bickering."

Hermione and Ron looked at one another, then just as quickly looked away.

Dazai cut through the awkward tension. "Since you've both done such a good job making nice, it must be time for me to finally give you your joining gifts."

Their attention immediately snapped back to Dazai. He smiled a little, feeling a bit like he was dangling a prize in front of them.

"Yes!" Ron grinned. "Finally, Fred and George can stop rubbing their gifts in my face!"

Dazai snorted. That did sound like something the twins would do. "Yes, yes. Congratulations on learning how to behave properly."

Hermione made a face at his phrasing. She shook her head. “Between that and all the work that went into—*uh, liberating the people from studying?”* She said the words carefully, as though she’d given the morals behind their cheating scheme a great deal of thought. “I think we’ve more than earned our joining gifts.”

Dazai smiled. They *had* earned their place in Hell’s Hounds. In fact, they’d earned it *last year,* when he’d invited them to join in the first place. Dazai didn’t just tell anyone about his nullification, after all. But he also felt much better without all the infighting. Besides, a little test of loyalty never hurt anyone. He should know.

Regardless—

“If you’re free now,” Dazai said, “I can give you your gifts. They’re in the office.”

Ron and Hermione’s eyes shined.

“Not in the Slytherin rooms?”

Dazai blinked. He turned to Blaise, who had been relatively silent up until this point. He shook his head. “I wanted to keep them safe!” He chirped.

The underlying, *‘and I don’t feel safe with any of my housemates,’* went unspoken. But judging by how Ron, Hermione, and Blaise’s expressions all twisted, the sentiment wasn’t as silent as Dazai had intended. Drat. If they told the twins, Dazai would never hear the end of their mother-henning.

“Are you busy?” Dazai asked before any of them could comment on it.

“Dazai...” Hermione trailed off.

He looked to Ron instead, who was still looking a bit ill at ease with all the eyes currently on them. Dazai raised a pointed brow.

Ron didn’t need any more prompting. “I’ll lead the way. Merlin knows you’ll only get lost otherwise.”

Hermione’s brow furrowed. “Ron,” she chided. Her eyes flashed back to Dazai.

“Lead the way, Mister Directions!”

Ron shot him a look. “Didn’t I tell you not to call me that?” But, despite his protests, Ron had already taken the lead of their group.

“Since when have I ever listened to you, though?”

Dazai was just a step behind him. Hermione and Blaise trailed after a second later.

On the walk to the gang’s office, they kept conversation to a minimum. Dazai supposed their silence was more than slightly his fault. Students gave them frightful or threatening looks as they passed, and no one was entirely willing to speak their mind under such judging scrutiny.

Dazai didn't mind, merely offering a chipper, *"it's this way, right? I—no. It's not here at all, you're right,"* every so often.

The stares didn't bother him. Dazai had been drilling that belief into his head since the year first began. The threats didn't bother him, either.

That mantra didn't make sleeping soundly in the shared Slytherin bedrooms any easier, though. (Within the past few days, Dazai's sleep schedule had gone from *'a few hours'* to *'a few minutes, if I can even manage that.')*

When the office door locked closed behind them, all of his friends let out a collective breath. Dazai left them at the door, bee-lining for the desk. He sat behind it, then fiddled with one of the desk's drawers.

Egg's head swiveled to watch their entrance, but after a second she turned her attention back to the window. Though most of the wall was stained glass, a few of the panes had taken on a more translucent hue. Egg seemed to be stalking some kind of movement outside, far below them. Her tail *thwapped* against the floor excitedly.

"What are you doing?"

Dazai glanced up only after he heard a click. *"Hm?"*

"Oh!" Hermione perked up. "He was picking the lock!"

Ron shot her a bewildered look. Then, realizing what she had said, turned that wide-eyed stare onto Dazai.

With an amused smile, Dazai slipped the bobby pin back into his robe. He rolled open the once-locked drawer and rooted around in it. *Papers, a few pens...*

Without looking up from his search, Dazai told them, "It's a useful skill to have."

"Alternatively, you could use the Alohomora spell, Ron," Hermione explained. Suddenly, she squeaked. Dazai finally looked up. Hermione's eyes were on him, looking guilty. *"Er*—I didn't mean to imply you couldn't do that, Dazai—"

"I'm awful with magic," he said, shrugging. "I probably couldn't."

Not without getting sick, at least. Though his progress with Snape was promising.

Dazai pulled two items out of the drawer, the rolled it shut. It clicked upon closing, already locked once more. In all honesty, Dazai wasn't sure where the key was. He wasn't sure this magically-spawned desk had ever even had one. But between his lock-picking skills and his subordinates' spell work, it was hardly an issue.

He came around the desk and walked to Ron, aware of everyone's expectant eyes on him. At some point, Blaise had walked past Ron and Hermione to stand at Dazai's back. Dazai cast him a pleased smile before turning his full focus onto the others.

Dazai took Ron's tie in his hands to straighten it. He pulled it neatly against Ron's neck. Satisfied, he snapped a tie clip into place. It was thin and, Dazai suspected, made of pure gold. A single red gem was placed in the middle, similar in cut to the one he'd given the twins.

Once the tie clip was in place, Dazai stepped back to appreciate how it looked. Ron stared down at his tie, an awed shine in his eyes. His hands twitched to pull the tie out and get a better look, but stalled just shy of mussing up Dazai's work getting everything straight.

"It's even in Gryffindor colors! Gold and Red!" Dazai gestured with a smile. He glanced to Hermione, then tugged at the green-and-silver bow tied around his own neck. "I'd have given it to you, Hermione, but you wear a bow like me. Nowhere to clip it."

"It's lovely!" Hermione leaned in to Ron's chest to get a closer look. "Though I've got to wonder where you get such expensive looking gifts from." She glanced up to meet Dazai's eyes.

He shrugged. "Does it really matter? They're yours now." He paused, then held his hand out for Hermione. "This one is yours. You seemed the type to appreciate a more practical gift."

With reverence, Hermione carefully plucked the gold-plated pen from Dazai's open palm.

"Oh, wow! It's—"

"Also very expensive," Dazai filled in. And it was—Mori (who Featherbrain had unceremoniously stolen the pen from) only ever used this pen as decoration when he wanted to schmooze with government officials. If the gold wasn't enough of an indication, the tiny white diamond was a dead giveaway to the pen's value. Dazai beamed. "Use it to write your essays, or something. Make everyone jealous that they have to use quills."

With great care, Hermione clipped the pen into her shirt pocket. She smoothed her robes over her chest. "I'll take good care of it. Thank you so much, Dazai," Hermine said, sounding like she meant every word and then some.

"Of course," Dazai said with a snap of his fingers. "Anything for my subordinates!"

-

"You've been shifty all day," Pansy said as she slid into the sofa. Her words were low and asking in a way that they never were when others were around. "What's wrong?"

Draco hesitated only a second before taking the chair across from Pansy. He could have taken up residence anywhere in the Slytherin common rooms. A few barking orders to his housemates had emptied the room in under a minute, after all. But Draco wanted to have this conversation where he could meet Pansy's eyes.

Nearby, the fireplace crackled. No matter the time of year, Hogwarts was warm. But the Slytherin dungeons remained cold all through spring and summer.

“Nothing is wrong.” Draco winced when Pansy raised a brow. His lie was that obvious, *huh?* “Nothing a seasoned wizard like myself can’t figure out,” he amended.

Pansy still didn’t look especially convinced, but she did nod along with easy acquiescence.

“Then what’s going on?”

Draco tossed the question around in his head and gave his own response probably more thought than it really warranted. The wording, the phrasing, the *‘is asking it this way treason to my father, or is it better this way?’*

“Draco,” Pansy snapped. "Are you okay?"

Draco refocused.

Pansy was leaned forward in her seat, brows pressed together in a pointed kind of worry. Forcefully, Draco shook the worries from his head. They didn’t belong there. A Malfoy didn’t fret about things like *impressing others* or *treason*. No, Malfoys did whatever they wanted because they couldn’t fail. A Malfoy was always right.

Probably.

Dazai said my father would want me to help him, Draco thought, then cringed upon realizing this justification was a lot more reassuring than the former.

Whatever journey his expression was going on while thinking this, it must have been especially troublesome. Pansy’s worry had doubled down into near panic when Draco finally settled on his course.

“Am *I* okay?” He drawled, shaking off his lingering nerves. “You look half-sick with something, Pansy.”

“Don’t make such concerning faces, then.” She paused. Only after a momentary silence did Pansy fall back into her seat again. She crossed her arms. “I'm looking out for you.”

Draco couldn’t help the way his eyes briefly fell to the side. He looked back to Pansy before she could comment.

“You remember the charity gala my father held over summer break?”

Pansy blinked. She clearly had not anticipated this to be the cause of Draco’s foul mood.

Draco couldn’t blame her: the event was several months past now, and large events like that were common for the Malfoy family. This year’s gala was no different from any of those in years past.

After a second, she nodded. “Sure. Why?”

Draco took a deep breath. Here goes... “Did—my father, did he talk to you at all?”

Pansy’s nose scrunched up and her brows bunched together in confusion. *“That’s* what's been bothering you all year? You do remember the two of us spending the entire event together, right? Alone? We hid under the catering table.”

Draco did remember that. Sneaking snacks with Pansy while they hid from guileful chitchat was Draco’s personal highlight of the event.

“If your father had talked to me, he would have had to know where we were hiding.” Pansy made a face. “Had he known that, I’m sure you’d recall the subsequent scolding.”

“But he talked to your mother,” Draco said.

Pansy’s frown deepened and, again, she leaned forward in her seat to get a better look at Draco’s expression. “Of course he did. The whole reason we went to that awful party was so Mother could needle some favor out of him.” Her eyes narrowed. “Seriously, Draco, what is this really about?”

“How about Millicent and Tracey? And Theodore?”

“What in Merlin’s name are you talking about?”

Draco gave her a reproachful look.

“It was just a normal, boring gala!” Pansy threw her arms up. “Why are you suddenly so hung up on it? I—” suddenly, her entire demeanor shifted. A blistering scowl fell across her face. “Don’t tell me this has something to do with Dazai.”

Draco blanched. “What?! What makes you—”

“Because it’s *always* about that idiot! Last year, you drew him into our group for no reason whatsoever, and every time you *should* have kicked him to the curb you only brought him in closer! And now—” she sneered, “—don’t think I haven’t noticed you watching him! You say you’re going to avoid him this year, but you’re always keeping an eye on him. And it’s not like I haven’t realized both of you disappear at the same time, sometimes.”

Draco’s mouth snapped shut with an echoing *click.*

The fire clicked and spit as well.

“You know he’s bad news,” Pansy rallied on, “Everyone knows, now. How don’t you see that?”

The line of Draco’s shoulders straightened. He buried that persistent guilt making itself known in his chest. “...We hung out with him all of last year. I’d know if he was really all the Daily Prophet makes him out to be.” Eyes narrowing, he asked Pansy, “Unless you don’t trust my judgement.”

Pansy startled at the accusation, but her scowl returned just as fast. “I trust you, Draco. But it doesn’t seem like you’re thinking things through at all.”

“I’ve thought it through plenty.” Probably too much.

“Look,” Pansy sighed. “It doesn't matter what either of us thinks—even though I’ve been telling you Dazai is bad since the very beginning. It’s bad publicity for our families if we’re seen with him. So stop wondering after him and stick with me instead. Maybe try and drag Blaise back with you...”

I*magining Blaise without Dazai at his side...* Draco couldn’t quite picture it. *Those two are almost as inseparable as Fred and George.*

“Blaise has changed since meeting Dazai,” Pansy emphasized. “And now you’re changing, too. I don’t like it.”

Draco sat upright, an unfamiliar emotion making it suddenly difficult to sit still.

Blaise had changed. For as long as Draco had known him, Blaise hadn’t cared for anything at all. He was always blank-faces and noncommittal responses. Of all his friends, Blaise was the least interested in the topic of blood purity.

“I don’t really care,” Blaise had said on the subject, once, looking thoroughly bored as he spoke. *“Pure blood or not, I’d rather be playing a game of chess right now.”*

For a Slytherin, even a blasé response like that was revolutionary.

But watching Blaise interact with Dazai now... no one could deny that he cared.

He wondered, distantly, if Dazai felt the same way towards Blaise that Blaise clearly felt towards him. That sort of friendship seemed impenetrable. But with all the secrets between them...

By Pansy’s scowl, Draco knew exactly what she had to say on the subject. But, despite himself, Draco couldn’t say for certain that Blaise’s change wasn’t a good one. That the boy wasn’t happier having just one thing in life to really believe in.

“That—I didn’t come here to talk about Dazai.”

“We need to.” Pansy huffed. “Someone has to remind you why we avoid his type.”

“Tell me about the gala.”

Pansy stared. After a second, a sneer curled the corners of her lips into an unsavory shape. “Your father didn’t talk to any of us. Children are beneath him,” she spat. “And no one talked about Dazai—not to me or to anybody else.” Her eyes narrowed, two thin slits that caught the burning light of the fireplace sharply. “Because everyone in their right mind knows to stay out of that mess.”

Draco fisted his slacks. “That’s not what Dazai tells me.”

Firelight turned Pansy's face a sickly shade of yellow.

"You sent your friends after him! He was bleeding when I found him!"

Pansy scoffed. "So, you did want to talk about Dazai, after all."

She watched him for a long moment, before flipping her hair over her shoulder. Pansy turned to face the fireplace. It crackled under her stare. The logs burnt and collapsed.

"People are all talk," she said. *"He's a demon, he's horrible.* I'm sick of hearing that from people who have never even met Dazai. Well, I have met him. And he's not the monster they paint him out to be."

Draco opened his mouth to agree—having thought something similar multiple times since the first Daily Prophet article was published.

"He's *worse."*

Draco froze.

"...What?"

Pansy's eyes snapped back to him. "He waltzed into Hogwarts like he owned the place—like blood purity means nothing at all. Like he can be a Slytherin just because he knows how to twist his words around." She clicked her tongue. As the seconds wore on, Pansy's voice grew increasingly worked up. "He cozied up to you and Blaise to manipulate you, and it *worked!* Somehow, after everything, it's almost as if you like him *more* now. That's insane. You know that's insane, right?"

She shook her head, hair flapping.

"And that damn smile! Like he alone knows everything in the world! Even though he has no idea what kind of mess he's walking into, dragging the Slytherin name through the mud—badmouthing blood politics. Making you do idiotic things like coming to ask me about him!"

"He didn't ask me to—"

"That isn't the point, Draco!" Pansy spat the words like venom. "People of our status can't afford to be around someone with such bad press around them. If people found out you two are friends, the Malfoy name won't survive the negative publicity. Then, I—"

Pansy cut herself off.

Draco stared. A sour feeling rankled in his chest.

Then I wouldn't be able to be around you, either.

Pansy didn't need to say it, Draco already knew. He'd thought them himself plenty of times since meeting Dazai, then with an even more alarming frequency ever since their meeting in Diagon Alley.

Thought, *I'll ruin the Malfoy name.*

Thought, *I'll be no better than the blood-traitors Father and I always make fun of.*

Thought, *Father will be so mad.*

"I've just been thinking," Draco said slowly, the words, somehow, sounding quieter than the pounding in his chest. "Maybe Blaise is right, in all of this."

Pansy gaped. "You're siding with Dazai. Even though he's... everything he does contradicts what a Slytherin should be."

Draco shook his head. "I think... Blaise just does whatever he wants. He's always been like that. And right now, Blaise wants to be with his friend—Daily Prophet and Slytherin status be damned."

He looked away abruptly, suddenly finding Pansy's severe expression too difficult to meet.

A withering fire met his eyes instead.

Draco bit his lip, finally voicing the thought that had been coiling around his chest ever since the Hell's Hounds first became *Hell's Hounds* and not just *Dazai's group of idiots.* Before *that mud-blood Hermione* became a laughingly named *coach*, and *blood traitor Ron Weasley* became *Quidditch practice partner.* When Dazai was still *subordinate*, and not yet fondly called *'Boss.'*

"I just want to hang out with my friends and not feel guilty about it," Draco sighed, pinching the hem of his robes between two treasonous fingers. "Is that so bad?"

It was a relief to say that out loud.

Pansy stared at him, wide-eyed and bewildered at Draco's suddenly solemn turn of character. She must have seen how long that thought had been tearing him up inside. How sharp a blade it wielded. Draco kept his eyes locked on the fire, hoping it would offer advice.

The crackle of dying flames that answered told him nothing, except that sometimes—even sitting in the place that was meant to be your home—you might never feel warm at all.

Pansy sighed, and the fight died out of her.

"You shouldn't have to choose between your father and your... y-your friend," Pansy said each word like it was choking her. "I won't make you do that."

As the last log in the fireplace turned completely to ash, Draco wondered why Pansy's promise filled him with nothing more than an oozing dread.

"If Dazai wasn't here, you wouldn't have to make such a painful decision," she whispered.

-

After a long day spent divided up between classes, Hell's Hounds, and the library, Dazai was due for a nice, long sleep.

A pleasant dream or two—

A restful night—

A—

Oh, who was he kidding?!

Dazai kicked off his covers, but only succeeded in tangling them ineffectually around his legs. He fell backwards with a huff.

The Slytherin bedrooms were pitch-black and near silent at night. Usually, it only took minor mental gymnastics for Dazai to grow comfortable enough to sleep here. But now—

Someone shifted two beds over. Dazai's entire body went rigid.

Dazai laid perfectly still, wide eyes staring at the ceiling. He waited, body tense and ready.

After a second, the room was silent again. Dazai let out a breath.

It's not like Dazai was paranoid. He just... didn't trust anyone here not to try smothering him while he slept. Dazai knew paranoid. Had seen it on his father's face mid-rant, or among the faces of the Port Mafia's traitors. And that kind of overwhelming terror wasn't quite what Dazai was feeling. His worry was too practical for that.

So, not paranoid. Just...

"So, so tired," Dazai grumbled, draping an arm over his eyes.

Someone coughed.

Dazai shot upright so fast a muscle in his back pulled.

After nearly of minute of staring at the curtains around his bed, Dazai collapsed back into his pillows.

This was definitely some kind of torture.

Dazai had laid there for hours now, squeezing his eyes tight and willing sleep to befall him. But every slight movement in the room had his heart thundering back to life. He'd perhaps scraped together a sum total of five minutes rest all night. He was tense and always prepared for a random attack. His spine felt as stiff as a cemetery headstone.

He'd tried everything from counting sheep to reading through his mail over-and-over again. Nothing could sufficiently numb his mind to the point of respite. At first, he'd tried reading Mori's missives, but that only stood to work Dazai up further. Eventually, he'd settled on the stack of papers he'd received just earlier that day at lunch:

A cobbled together collection of Daily Prophet articles tied together by an unusually (read: magically) strong string. Attached was a letter reading, *"Flor finally managed to find some more copies for you,"* signed by the Leaky Cauldron's Tom and what Dazai assumed must be the handwriting of a particularly drunk Florence. Though Dazai had skimmed the articles, it was nothing he hadn't heard from his peers a thousand times now.

The only worthwhile article had been one dated only a couple days earlier: *THE DEMON STUDENT KILLS AGAIN!* and the corresponding *"did this really happen???"* from Tom.

The article then proceeded to detail a mostly inaccurate description of the petrification of Mrs. Norris. Once again, Dazai was front-and-center as the incident's leading villain.

Needless to say, reading hadn't settled Dazai's nerves in the slightest.

Taking a deep breath, Dazai spread his senses throughout the room.

The feeling of magic buzzing about the room gave him something to center on. He tried to focus on the particular sensations of magic around him, hoping to give each varying feeling a name. But just as soon as Dazai narrowed in on the somewhat bitter tang of Draco's sleeping magic across the room, his focus would slip away. Dazai was just too exhausted for any amount of concentration like that.

Surely, he'd get an earful about it from Snape during their next lesson. If Dazai couldn't keep his focus now, he definitely wouldn't be able to cast Motus Subtilis later.

If this kept up, he would just have to find a nice tower to jump off of. Or a nice length of rope...

With a petulant shove, Dazai detangled the blankets wrapped around his legs. He shivered at the sudden cold.

All this tossing and turning wasn't getting him anywhere. Trying to focus on magic didn't help. Nor did drowning out the noise with a pillow stuffed over his head.

What Dazai needed was a change in scenery.

Or a sufficient blow to the head, Dazai thought indulgently, before hastily realizing, *wait—Madam Pomfrey would have me on bedrest for the rest of the year!*

Course set, Dazai silently got to his feet. He snatched the cloak thrown across his bed and tossed it around his shoulders. While he stretched his arms out over his head, Dazai searched the room for any other night-owls. Fortunately, it seemed like everyone was either well asleep by now, or at least hidden behind their curtains.

He was still careful not to make any noise as he crossed the room straight for the exit. Dazai cushioned the door shut with his palm.

"Truant!"

Dazai jumped. He whirled around to face—

The ugly, painted face of Elizabeth Burke scowled down at him. The painting of Ms. Burke, which had hung outside the Slytherin rooms for as long as Dazai had been at Hogwarts, had never been his biggest fan. In effect, Dazai held nothing but loathing for her.

"Hush," he turned his nose up at the painting with a sniff.

"Truant!" She shouted again. Dazai raised a hand to cover an ear, her yelling seeming twice as loud at midnight. "When Severus hears about this—"

Dazai hovered a finger an inch above Burke's painting.

Immediately, she went dead quiet.

"That's what I thought," Dazai grumbled. He dropped both hands back to his cloak to search for where he'd tucked away his gloves. Finally finding them, Dazai made a show of pulling them over his fingers one at a time.

He glanced back up at the painting, failing now to meet Burke's shifty eyes.

It had only been a hunch that the paintings could also feel No Longer Human, as the ghosts at Hogwarts could. But Burke's one-eighty flip had just proven that theory correct. Dazai allowed himself a smug smile at being proven right even when so terribly sleep deprived.

"Get on your way then, brat," Burke crossed her arms. "I may not risk your ire now, but don't think I won't hesitate once Severus arrives!"

Dazai cast a glance around the hall, but Snape was nowhere to be found. Not even the torches were lit overhead. Dazai briefly considered teasing the painting for it, but quickly decided otherwise. He wasn't in the mood to joke around right now. He just wanted some sleep.

"I'd keep hesitating, if I were you," Dazai said with a smile as he headed down the hall. "I mean, given my reputation, I think people would expect me to kill you. So Snape being here probably couldn't stop me."

Dazai laughed when he heard Burke squeak at his back.

Then, on silent feet, he snuck out of the dungeons.

Dazai still had no idea how to navigate Hogwarts, despite having lived here for some time now. Despite that, he always seemed to end up where he needed to be one way or another. At this point, Dazai wasn't sure he really cared where his feet took him.

Dazai trailed his hand along the wall as he walked, feeling the minute changes in magic as he did so. Every so often, magic would fizzle underneath his palm. Some, he recognized as the twins' secret passages. Others, Dazai had no clue.

The stone felt cold under his hand no matter how far from the dungeons Dazai walked. Even through his glove, Dazai could feel a chill.

Abruptly, the magic under his hand squirmed.

Dazai drew his hand back with a flinch.

A door—a familiar door—suddenly towered over him.

Dazai stared at it, then double-checked his surroundings. This hallway wasn't recognizable to him in the slightest, but...

"The gang office?" Dazai mouthed.

Carefully, he twisted the knob. The door swung open.

Dazai peeked through the crack of the door. But after a moment of silent-but-intense scrutiny, found nothing expect the gang's office behind the door. Never mind that the office was usually on the seventh floor, not the... whatever floor this was. Another once over revealed only the office's usual fare: the stain-glass window, the couch, the desk.

He shut the door at his back.

With it, Dazai felt the tension bleed out from his shoulders.

The office had never magically shown itself for Dazai before—nor had it ever given him the things he wanted, like it had for Blaise and the others. He remembered what the twins had told him earlier that year, about the door appearing only if you "wanted it really hard."

What awful advice. Though, if Dazai's desperate exhaustion was any indication...

"Finally listening to me, huh?" Dazai chided, rapping a knuckle against the wall. Naturally, he received no response aside from the sticky, ever-present burn of magic in the air.

Until a second later, when a curious trill echoed his question.

Dazai perked up. Sprawled across a mess of pillows, blankets, and a few tossed-aside galleons, Egg perked up as well.

At some point, the blackboard had been rolled over to her nest. In big, chalk letters someone had written *'Ron's pet dragon!!!!'* A huge '*X*'was scribbled over Ron's name, and a neatly printed *'Draco's*' was written instead.

Then, in handwriting Dazai knew to be Hermione's, *'no bickering on the chalkboard!'*

Dazai's nose curled at a mostly-eaten pile of raw meats at Egg's clawed feet. The smell of blood filled the room and, mutely, Dazai wondered if Draco was providing it or if the magic room was. But never mind that—

"I'm sleeping in here tonight," Dazai told the dragon, holding its slitted gaze. "You better not make a fuss about it. I'm tired enough, I think I would just kill you."

Egg chirped.

Dazai watched her for a second longer before nodding. Whether or not Egg could understand him, it wasn't making any move to bother him. Dazai would take what he could get.

"Well, goodnight then."

With that said, Dazai headed straight for the couch and summarily collapsed his entire weight into it. He dragged a blanket over his head to block out the flickering candlelight.

Quiet.

It was finally, *finally* quiet.

Dazai let out a breath, and with it the last dregs of his tension.

The couch was smaller than his bed, but the isolation more than made up for it. With a yawn, Dazai curled up into a little ball and welcomed sleep.

Dazai was so ready to sleep he only noticed the clack of claws on tile when it stopped right beside his head.

Dazai pried his eyes open.

Egg stared at him, an inch away.

He swallowed.

"You—you're not feral, right? Draco wasn't lying about that?"

Egg tilted her head.

"...you know what, I don't care. Maybe your venom will put me to sleep. Maybe it will put me to sleep forever."

She snorted a plume of smoke into his face.

Dazai choked. He shot upright to clear his lungs, coughing roughly. "A-awful! You're the worst. I'm trying to sleep, you know?"

Rather than breathing smoke onto his again—or even baring her fangs in attack—Egg instead hopped up onto the couch beside Dazai. Then, just as Dazai had done a second before, she curled up. Egg wrapped her tail around herself, settling the tip on her nose.

Dazai coughed.

Oh, whatever. I just want to sleep!

With an exhausted sigh, he made himself comfortable at Egg's back. His eyes slid shut as he drew the blanket up to his chin.

"I'm too tired to deal with this. If you accidentally touch me while we're asleep, that's your own fault."

Egg let out another smoky breath that sounded distinctly unimpressed.

Dazai felt her snout butt into his gloved palm just seconds before sleep took its hold.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading! wishing everyone a good week :)
and happy birthday! : D lol

next up: another snape and dazai lesson (can you tell i really enjoy writing these two interacting?? lol)

Good Old Fashion Detective Work

Chapter Summary

Dazai makes headway on his investigation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Dazai woke up the following morning, Egg had been sprawled across his chest. Her claws were digging pointy little holes in Dazai's cloak and her tail loudly *thwapped* against the couch.

Egg hadn't touched his skin during the night and died, then.

"Good job," he had groggily congratulated.

In response, Egg merely curled into a tighter ball. A second later, smoky snores filled the room again.

Seeing as they had successfully survived one night of not killing one another, Dazai had decided to full-time move into the gang office.

Sleep had never come quicker.

And sleep was *wonderful.*

How he had gone so long without collapsing on the floor was beyond him. For the first time since starting his second school year at Hogwarts, Dazai had woken up well rested. That very same day, Dazai had grabbed all his belongings from the common room and dragged it up to the office. His books were now locked in the desk and a freshly-fluffed pillow adorned the sofa.

And it wasn't only Dazai taking full advantage of his new sleeping arrangement—he got the feeling every other Slytherin was glad not to have to share a room with their resident demon. Egg seemed to be enjoying her new pillow, too.

The only objection was a raised brow from Blaise and the observation made over breakfast, "I didn't see you this morning."

"The Slytherin rooms were getting a little stuffy for me," Dazai had told him smilingly.

All around, it was a good arrangement.

Dazai was feeling well-rested, and a well-rested Dazai could get down to business.

First order of said business being...

A pair of third-year Ravenclaw students were giggling amongst themselves just outside the library doors. Upon spotting them, Dazai pushed off the wall and headed straight at them, a pep in his step.

These two would be as good a start as any (moreover, they were the only students around that hadn't immediately sighted Dazai and run off). Most importantly, Dazai didn't recognize them from Pansy's gang.

Dazai raised a hand in cheery greeting.

"Hello, fellow students! You wouldn't happen to know where Theodore Nott is, would you?"

They shrieked.

"Ah..." Wincing, Dazai brought a hand to cup his now-ringing ear. "You screamed."

They stared at him, visibly shaking. The girl's mouth opened and closed, but only weak, breathy squeaks came out. Dazai quirked a brow. He didn't feel particularly terrifying today. But these two clearly thought otherwise. Though everyone at Hogwarts seemed to be thinking the same, these days.

At last, the girl's friend managed to shake a few words loose from their own quivering lips. "Theodore... *um,* Nott? Is—isn't he a Slytherin?"

Dazai nodded. "He is!"

They jumped at Dazai's blatant enthusiasm.

When they didn't say anymore, Dazai gestured to the library.

"He's not in the library or the Slytherin common rooms," he explained slowly. Those were the only places Dazai had checked. And, more accurately, the only places Dazai could reliably *find* well enough to check. "I won't find him at this rate. One of you must have seen him around."

The Ravenclaws shared a wide-eyed looked, then frantically shook their heads.

"N-no, we haven't."

"We wouldn't run into a Slytherin..."

Dazai let out a breath, making a show of looking particularly displeased. He dropped his shoulders and levelled them with a disappointed look.

If they were afraid before, they were downright horrified now.

As expected.

“Now, now. We can’t have that!” Dazai tutted. He flapped a hand around distractedly, and the motion startled another flinch out of the other students. “I really need to find him, you know.”

“Um...”

Satisfied that he had them both desperate to earn his good-graces, Dazai changed track. He clapped. Suddenly, he flipped his entire demeanor from ‘disappointed-but-threatening menace’ to ‘scarily-chipper-and-definitely-scheming-something menace.’ In the span of less than one second, his entire posture changed, and a huge, beaming smile split his face in two. “I know! You two can go fetch him for me!”

They balked, shared a look, then somehow balked even further.

“I... *um—”*

“We shouldn’t... *er,* you—”

Dazai smiled.

“That’s not really a request, you know.”

Silence hung in the air. A long moment passed, then Dazai chuckled. His giggles cut the tension like a knife.

“Ah, I’m just kidding.” He eyed them, watching as their horror didn’t dampen even slightly. “It’s your own choice to help me or not, obviously.” Dazai’s smile thinned, sharp. “I’ll hunt him down eventually, either way. But I would really appreciate if you could do just this one thing for me... before I get too annoyed.”

Though Dazai had no intention of actually hurting these two, the implied threat landed heavy regardless. Something frantic flashed across both of the Ravenclaws’ expressions.

Quirrell’s death, Mrs. Norris’ petrification, any of the Daily Prophet’s lies about the Demon Student—

Whichever of those realizations had just come crashing down on them, it seemed to light a fire underfoot.

Fear was a good motivator.

And a method that Mori would certainly applaud him using now. Dazai sniffed at the thought.

“No, no, no! It’s, *um—”* the girl squeaked.

“We’ll go and find him for you!” The other took a hasty, shaking step back. “R-right now!”

Dazai beamed. “Really? Thanks! You’re both too kind!”

Again, their only reaction was to nod in desperate agreement.

Satisfied, Dazai gestured for them to get moving. “Bring him back kicking and screaming if you have to!” he called after them.

Within seconds, the Ravenclaws were frantically scampering down the hall and around the corner.

Dazai’s enthusiastic waving stopped the second they were out of sight. His hands dropped back to his side with a tired *fhwump!*

They wouldn’t be back for a little while, Dazai reasoned. In the meantime—

Something ginger flashed in the corner of Dazai’s vision.

Immediately drawing into a defensive position, he whirled to face the threat head-on. His hand rose to his chest protectively.

Only to face—

Nothing.

Dazai’s brows furrowed, confusion marking an ugly frown across his lips. He was sure he’d seen someone just at the end of the hall. Someone with ginger hair. *A Weasley..?* But, unless his mind was playing tricks on him, Dazai was definitely alone.

Probably some brat spotted me and ran away with their tail between their legs, Dazai thought with narrowed eyes. He tried to shake the unease off with a literal shrug of his shoulders.

Maybe whoever this stranger was, they would also go and find Nott for him. Speed up the process a bit so Dazai could go back to doing important things.

Like chatting with Hell's Hounds. Or looking for a good place to kill himself.

Or, more realistically, bending over backwards to figure out what Lucius and Mori wanted from him.

With a sigh, Dazai refocused. He turned back to the library.

It was mostly empty—the bulk of the student body evidently figuring that it was Dazai’s territory and wanting to steer clear. Not that Dazai minded the quiet, but the whole situation was still a little irksome. At least it gave him some room to work in peace.

He had time before those Ravenclaws got back. Certainly, it was enough time to at least open one book in search of information about the Chamber of Secrets.

Until now, his research had been mostly... ineffective. Which wasn’t to say the information didn’t exist. Dazai got the feeling that, like the Philosopher’s Stone, the intel he was searching for was probably being kept in the library’s restricted section. Unfortunately, Dazai couldn’t just waltz back there in the middle of the day.

The most logical course of action in the meantime would be researching petrification. All of his research last year into magical creatures was helping to narrow down exactly where to start. Thinking this, Dazai kicked off the wall and started towards the section on magical reptile species.

Madam Pince gave a tight nod upon seeing Dazai before turning back to her own work. Seeing as the librarian was one of the few people who didn't have it out for him at Hogwarts, Dazai gave a small wave hello in return.

He only had to search for a minute before finding the section he was looking for. *Fire salamanders, drakes....* A familiar book on dragon rearing caught his attention as well, but that wasn't what he was looking for today.

Better to start with a broader subject.

Dazai plucked a promising looking tome from its shelf *(The Magicks of Scaled Beasts and Their Kin).* He flipped open to the index and scanned its contents as he sat down. He quickly settled on the chapter for basilisks. However, before he could start reading, someone shakily cleared their throat.

Dazai tore his eyes off the book. He looked up to see the two Ravenclaws shifting nervously in front of him. A few feet behind them, the worried figure of Theodore Nott was looking anywhere but at Dazai. His eyes dashed from the wall, to the floor, to—pleadingly—Madam Pince.

The librarian offered no assistance expect to quietly flip a page of her records.

Nott's shoulders slumped.

"Woah," Dazai feigned surprise, "you two are fast."

The Ravenclaws shuffled from foot to foot. They looked out of breath.

Almost as if they ran the whole way there and back, Dazai thought, hiding a smile.

"Thanks, you two!" Dazai took pity on them, and waved them off without much fanfare. "You're the best! As a reward, I won't ever talk to you again."

Relief melted stark across their faces. Not needing to be told twice, the Ravenclaws scurried away. They were gone from the library before Pince could even yell, *'no running indoors!'*

Even though they didn't look back once, Dazai playfully waved goodbye.

Nott's gulp was audible.

Right. That was enough messing around.

Dazai kicked the seat across from him. It skidded back only a few inches, but Nott flinched regardless. "Sit."

"Um." Nott glanced at the chair then back to the wall. "Can't you just... tell me what you want?"

Dazai raised a brow. "I'm trying to be polite."

Nott's eyes didn't lift. He toyed with a fraying edge of his robe, stilled, then started again.

Fear made people do what you wanted, but it almost made them kind of annoying to hold a conversation with. Dazai hoped Mori was eating his words, back in Yokohama. He heaved out a sigh.

With a stretch, Dazai laid his legs across the other chair instead. He crossed them one over the other. "You'll stand, then," he decided.

Nott nodded, looking a bit desperate.

"I'll be nice and cut to the chase," Dazai said. "I doubt Pansy wants you talking to me, anyway."

"...Pansy?"

He hummed. "Her little gang."

Dazai could clearly recall having seen Nott sitting with Millicent and Tracey in the past. Surely, Nott was at least aware of Pansy's gang. Though, now that he thought about it, Nott himself had never been present at any of their clashes.

Nott confirmed his thoughts a second later. "I don't really like clubs. Or... *uh.* Gangs."

Dazai nodded, as if this were already common knowledge to him. "You're a bit of a loner then. Well," he leaned back into the chair. Tilting his head back to peak under Nott's fringe, he met the boy's eyes at last. "I'll get straight to the point."

Though Nott's eyes skipped away immediately, he nodded without complaint.

"Theo—can I call you Theo?" Dazai asked, but didn't wait for an answer. "The day of the petrification. You were there."

Theo's head snapped up. His eyes were wide and his mouth was dropped open into a surprised *Oh.* Dazai watched as a small bead a sweat rolled down his chin.

Dazai's lips curled into a smile. "You say you don't like big groups, but it was you and a whole *crowd* of people who ran into me that day." Theo twitched. "Curious."

"I—" Theo shook his head, frantic. The panic in his eyes was pressured with blatant confusion. "It's not anything like... I mean, really... Wh-what are you even asking me here?"

Huh. Dazai would have expected a different kind of reaction, had he been interrogating the culprit right now. But Theo, behind all of his fear, really did just look confused. Like he genuinely had no idea what Dazai was getting at.

Dazai changed tracks. “I’m looking for someone,” he said, backtracking. He made sure to keep his voice level and friendly, not wanting to scare Theo off without digging for at least *some* information. “Tell me who else was with you in that crowd.” He paused, then added, “Or even just nearby at the time.”

Theo’s brows pinched together. Dazai could practically see the questions causing friction behind Theo’s eyes, but the other Slytherin stopped just short of voicing any of them aloud. When Dazai leaned forward in his chair, it seemed to startle Theo out of his thoughts.

“Milli and Tracey were with me.”

“I already knew about those two,” Dazai brushed the answer off. Moreover, Draco had already given him the rundown on them. As far as the Malfoy was concerned, they were just bystanders—a thorn in Dazai’s side notwithstanding. “If it was just the three of you walking together, why did you walk in with a whole mob?”

Theo blinked.

“Hurry up, will you?” Dazai huffed. Immediately, Theo paled. “I have a class to get to.”

“It... *er,* it’s Saturday, though?”

“Sure is. Now hurry up.”

“R-right! *Um,* well we just ran into each other? I don’t know. I think a club let out, maybe.”

A club... well, it was reasonable. Dazai had never dealt much with club life at Hogwarts, choosing instead to immerse himself in solo research and gang-making. But it would explain why so many unfamiliar faces were gathered in a random hall during the break period.

“I mean, they all came out together. So I thought... yeah.” Theo was still talking when his lip curled minutely. “Except for that Weasley.”

Dazai’s attention immediately snapped back into focus.

He leaned forward minutely. “Which Weasley?”

Theo shifted on his feet. His eyes flashed from Dazai then back again to the floor, clearly noticing Dazai’s abrupt interest. “Not the twins. Or the—or Ron. I know you’re. *Um.* Friends with them.”

“Who was it?” Dazai asked. But even as he was doing a mental tally of all the Weasley siblings, the answer had already made itself clear.

After all, he’d seen her, hadn’t he?

“The new one,” Theo said, “the girl.”

Ginny Weasley.

“She came out of nowhere maybe a minute before we found you...*um.”* He sniffed, then course-corrected, *“Uh,* she was walking alone. But she spun around and joined the group after that."

Dazai fell back against the chair.

Any shock he might have had at the revelation was covered over immediately with a look of contemplation. Dazai scratched at his chin thoughtfully.

Ginny Weasley... the behavior Theo described exactly fit the movements Dazai had predicted for their culprit. Moreover, Dazai knew for a fact she had been present at Lockhart’s book signing. Certainly, long enough for Lucius to talk to her.

And—Dazai realized with a frown—if Lucius’ scheme were to fall apart, it would be a ‘blood traitor’ family that took the blame rather than the well-respected Malfoy family. Everything from the application to the motive made sense.

But what could have swayed a Weasley to a Malfoy’s side?

Had he threatened her?

Enchanted her?

Dazai didn’t think it was the latter, if only for the fact that he hadn’t sensed any nefarious magic on the girl. But that didn’t mean he hadn’t simply missed it...

Theo cleared his throat. Pulled from his thoughts, Dazai glanced up at him.

Theo fidgeted nervously for a short moment before seeming to gather his wits. He leveled Dazai with the steadiest gaze Dazai had seen yet. “Is that all you needed from me?” He sounded unsure. “Is that Weasley...” Suddenly, Theo gasped. He took an unconscious half-step back. “Is she a witness!?”

Dazai almost laughed at the look of horror on Theo’s face—the boy no doubt thinking Dazai was trying to *silence the witness* to Mrs. Norris’ petrification. Whatever severe expression had crossed Dazai’s face while he was deep in thought probably wasn’t helping to soften his image, either.

Rather than laugh, however, Dazai only waved the worry off. “If you’d like,” he said ambiguously.

Theo made a face at that, clearly not understanding Dazai’s meaning.

“Did you see Lockhart at all?” Dazai asked instead of clarifying.

“I... no? Was I supposed to?”

“Hm... Nope.”

Well, that didn't exactly take Lockhart off his list of suspects. But Dazai could still probably ignore the man for now. This new lead was more promising.

Dazai's eyes fell back to the book in front of him, ignoring how Theo seemed to grow more uncomfortable and befuddled by the second. The ugly, drawn face of a basilisk stared up at him. It was bared, poisonous fangs, and a gaze that could turn men to stone. Petrification.

A basilisk. That was his guilty party.

Theories and plans kicked to life in Dazai's mind. *The next course of action for me should be...*

"Uh—"

"You can go," Dazai dismissed, not looking up from the table.

Theo made a flabbergasted sound.

Dazai spared him a glance. "If I have any more questions, I'll send for you later. You're free to leave, now."

"Um... th-thank you?" Theo choked out. He didn't look like he knew how to make heads-nor-tails of the conversation.

"You're welcome!" Dazai beamed.

He turned back to stare blankly into the table before Theo could think to respond, but he heard the boy walk away a few seconds later.

Dazai had a lot to think about. It was a good thing he was blacklisting anyone outside of Draco from this investigation! The last thing Dazai needed now was having to explain to Ron and the twins that his lead suspect was now their little sister.

Dazai ran a hand through his hair. It was getting a little long. He fisted the hairs curling over his neck and pulled them until it burned.

Ginny Weasley... just what did Lucius say to you..?

-

Dazai was only ten minutes late to his Remedial Magics lesson with Snape. It was almost impressive. Dazai had thought for sure that number was going to be closer to thirty minutes.

Well...

At this point, Snape should just be glad he decided to show up at all.

To be honest, Dazai had considered skipping. It wasn't that he didn't like having the opportunity to practice spells. If anything, he enjoyed it. Rather...

"I've been casting *Motus Subtilis* for ages now." *Tick*—the broken clock's little hand clicked forward. Dazai blew a raspberry. "Can't you teach me a cooler spell already?"

Tick.

He turned a narrow-eyed stare onto Snape. "This is too easy."

Tick, tick.

Snape took a sip from his tea.

"I'm bored."

Tick, tick, tick.

The professor's brow twitched.

"Sir, I'm bored. You're boring me."

Tick, tick, tick, tick—

Snape's hand forcefully fell down on the broken clock, holding the hands firmly in place. At once, the incessant *tick-tick-ticking* of Dazai's *Motus Subtilis* spell cut off. For just a second, the potion master's office was perfectly silent.

"If you keep doing that," Snape glared pointedly, "you're going to give yourself a headache."

Dazai grinned. "But I got your attention, didn't I?"

"You're giving *me* a headache."

"You're no fun," Dazai chided. Then, upon seeing the annoyance on Snape's face tip towards outright anger, he amended, "I'm ready to move onto stronger spells, Professor. I've already cast this one a hundred times today, and I don't feel sick at all!"

Snape eyed him for a moment. With a bereaved sigh, he finally let go of the clock. When a second passed and Dazai didn't start it up ticking again, he said, "That is exceptionally fast improvement."

"I've been practicing."

"Safely, I hope."

"Sure, safely." Dazai paused. Just long enough for some worry to drip into Snape's expression. Then, "Blaise is always willing to supervise me. I don't even have to ask him nicely, since he's kind of a mother-hen already"

Irritation and relief both flickered across Snape's face. Then, much to Dazai's amusement, it was only irritation.

"So I can learn another spell now, right?" Dazai asked. "Like that petrification spell!"

Snape shot him a quelling glare. Dazai took a long sip from his own tea to hide a cheeky smile. Judging by Snape's returning huff, this action was in no way subtle.

"The killing curse, then," Dazai amended.

"No." Snape glared. "And *no*. Absolutely not. Given the public's perception of you, Mr. Dazai, I would advise not to even joke about those spells."

"You may have a point... But Professor Snape wouldn't rat me out, since I'm his favorite student and all."

Snape's returning, tired-eyed stare was the only validation Dazai received.

Snape ran a finger smoothly over the rim of his tea. Dazai eyed the contemplative motion for a second before making of show of turning back to the clock. He set his own cup down with a *clink* against the wood of Snape's desk.

"How are you feeling?"

Dazai blinked. "Fine," he said. "Good. Not sick at all."

Snape stared at him, clearly trying to dissect if Dazai were telling the truth or not. After a few seconds passed, he seemed to come to a conclusion.

"I suppose we may move on to another spell." Before Dazai could start cheering—relief from the sheer boredom of casting such a lame spell too enticing not to be rewarded with applause—Snape hushed him with a sharp look. "Something small. And simple. If I recall correctly, last year you were able to perform the *Verdimilious* spell with some success."

Success was a bold word choice. Yes, Dazai had cast the spell. But he'd also promptly thrown up. So...

Verdimilious was also, in Dazai's not-so-humble opinion, an incredibly boring spell.

"What am I going to do with little green lights?" He whined. "Let's do *Wingardium Leviosa* instead. It's like the next step up from *Motus Subtilis* anyway, isn't it?"

Tick.

Like a dog wagging its tail upon hearing its name, the broken clock on the desk suddenly ticked forward a pace. Both Dazai and Snape glanced at it before returning to their private battle of wills.

Snape raised a brow.

“And I’ve cast the levitation spell in the past, too!”

Also with very limited success and very painful backlash. But what Snape didn’t know wouldn’t come back to bite Dazai in the ass.

“I don’t recall that,” Snape commented flatly.

“It was more of a personal project of mine. You weren’t invited, since Draco said he could teach me better than you lot.”

Snape’s lip curled.

“But now that you’ve taught me *Motus Subtilis—” tick* “—that’s one spell for each of you. I’d say you’re comparable as teachers,” Dazai plowed onward.

Snape’s eyes flicked to the clock, then back to Dazai, narrowed.

While Dazai waited for a proper response, he took a sip from his tea. It was sweet and smooth—clearly Snape had added honey again. Despite his protests, Dazai supposed the honeyed taste *was* enjoyable.

Snape’s heavy sigh pulled him from his musings.

“I will permit you to move on to *Wingardium Leviosa,”* he said.

Dazai grinned. “Great—!”

“If,” Snape punctuated the word with a rap against the desk, *“and only if,* you can cast *Verdimilious* successfully without being sick.”

Dazai deflated.

For any other student, such a request would have been laughable at best. But for Dazai...

Snape made a face, clearly noticing Dazai’s hesitance. “If such a task is too insurmountable even in thought, then you should not be moving off of the *Motus Subtilis* spell yet.”

Shaking his head, Dazai argued, “I’m only thinking my approach over! Don’t count me out just yet, Professor!”

Snape rolled his eyes. “I am familiar with your methods by now, Mr. Dazai.”

When Professor Quirrell cast Verdimillious*, the spell had a certain feel to it...*

Dazai pursed his lips and flexed his fingers over his wand.

...quivering and airy. Yes, that had been it.

Across the desk, Snape watched him with an unimpressed, dull expression. Sounding vaguely pressured, now, he reiterated, “If you can’t do it, don’t even try.”

It was that kind of spell—and that kind of feeling that allowed him to cast it successfully last year as well.

“That’s awful advice from a teacher.”

Snape sneered

“But,” Dazai hastily corrected, “I guess it’s on par for you, Professor.”

“I’m trying to keep you from becoming a permanent resident in the infirmary,” Snape growled, though Dazai thought he heard a bit of light-hearted bantering in there somewhere. “Unless that is your goal—”

“It’s not, it’s not!” Dazai gestured enthusiastically. Inadvertently, the exaggerated flailing flung his wand to-and-fro, the sharp end pointed wildly across the entire room.

A hand clamped around Dazai’s wrist.

He froze. A flinch wracked his body.

Dazai automatically released the grip on his wand and it went clattering onto the desk instead. It rolled some before clanking against Snape’s mug and coming to a full-stop.

A wide-eyed Dazai stared at Snape.

Snape stared back, expression caught between scolding and bewilderment.

A pause. Dazai didn't breathe.

The second Snape’s eyes met his own, however, his severe demeanor immediately melted away. Something twisted in his expression instead. A second later, he slowly and carefully removed his hand from Dazai’s wrist.

Dazai drew his hand protectively to his chest.

“Don’t—” Snape said haltingly. He grabbed Dazai’s fallen wand, began to lift it, then slid it across the desk instead. “—do that.”

Dazai took his wand back, then pricked his wrist mindlessly against the point.

“A wand is a tool, but it is also a kind of weapon,” Snape explained. His voice still held a cautious quality to it, as though he were choosing his every breath with the upmost consideration. Dazai prickled at the observation. “Waving it around like that is bound to get someone hurt. Especially for someone with such limited control as yourself.”

Dazai sniffed, feeling warmth in his face at being told-off and also at his mindless reaction to a mere touch. “I’m being careful,” he grumbled.

“Nothing about waving your wand around is careful. Ever. Imagine it were...” Snape trailed off, clearly debating his words, “...a knife. Or a... a muggle firearm.”

“Well, those are only dangerous if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

Dazai had handled both knives and guns in the past. In fact, he’d used them both enough times to consider himself an expert. Expert enough to not accidentally shoot someone while waving a gun in their face.

Some of the annoyance must have shown on his face, because a second later Snape let out a weary breath.

“As I said,” he eyed Dazai’s wand, “dangerous.”

Petulant, Dazai glared across the desk. Snape met his eyes with an impassive look.

Again, he sighed. “Just be more careful, Problem Child.”

Dazai maintained his glare until he couldn’t hold it any longer—the demands of contemplating a *verdimillious* spell too much to multitask with. His eyes dropped to his wand.

Light and shaky. He’d decided it was an light and shaky feeling last year, hadn’t he?

Only...

Dazai’s brows furrowed and an irritated scowl turned his lips down.

“Don’t hurt yourself.”

Dazai’s head whipped up to see Snape regarding him with a thoughtful frown. He potion’s master was leaned forward on a palm, tea forgotten at his side in favor of watching his student.

Light and shaky, light and—

Dazai ran a hand through his hair, agitated.

It’s no use! I can’t focus on the magic! It’s all—

Just beneath the cuff of his gloves, the impression of fingers seemed to linger. An invisible brand. A warning.

Mentally chastising himself, Dazai tried to force his focus away from where Snape’s hand had grabbed at him. He needed to focus on important things, like learning magic. Not the ever-increasing *beat-beat-beating* of his too-fast heart. Not how the feeling of Snape's hand seemed to linger on him now. A ghostly impression, like a memory.

He didn't like it.

Straightening the line of his shoulders, Dazai buried the discomfort in the back of his mind, but he was sure it was showing on his face anyway.

-

Severus had made a mistake.

It hadn't been intentional. And it also wasn't the first time he'd made this mistake. Because, though Severus was never one to shy away from snapping at a student, he did recognize that Dazai needed a little more...

Care. The word he was looking for was *care.*

When Dazai started waving his wand around with wild abandon, Severus had acted with any ounce of said care. Rather, the only thought in his head was, *"that's dangerous, you idiot!"*

But the second his hand clamped down on Dazai's—

The second he saw the boy's face—

Severus messed up.

Dazai had gone deathly pale, and just as still. Something flashed in his eyes for a brief second, replaced almost immediately by an almost *hunted* look.

A shivered racked up Severus' spine.

He'd never seen a child look quite like that before.

Never knew how much no child should ever look like that.

Letting go of Dazai's arm, Severus carefully leaned back into his own seat, hoping to put some distance between them. It didn't look like Dazai was breathing, Severus thought distantly. *Like a statue.*

In what he hoped was a soothing voice, Severus explained himself. It was no excuse for grabbing Dazai so abruptly, but perhaps it would at least offer the boy some rationale. He tried to subtly nudge Dazai's tea forward, but to no avail. Dazai's eyes didn't even flick towards the still-steaming mug. Still, Severus was relieved to see the hunted look in Dazai's eyes slowly fade with time alone.

Only, as they talked, that panic turned not into content, but into annoyance. Irritation. Something near to anger.

Judging by Dazai's faraway look, it wasn't directed at Severus.

Suddenly, it felt like he had swallowed a stone. Severus' suspicions of abuse only grew by the day.

Suspicions that only *he* seemed to care about. But his investigation was getting him nowhere, thanks to the tight-lipped Yokohama government—!

But I'm not in charge of his investigation any more. Minerva is.

Would she treat Dazai with the same level of care? Would she take her research outside of just what Albus asked, for the betterment of one student? He had warned her, but did she *understand?*

(Am I really any better?)

A half-scorched letter sat untouched in his desk, burning a hole of its own Severus' conscious.

Guilt and inaction.

Grabbing a wrist that wasn't wanting to be taken.

Uncertainty drew a sigh from his lips.

Severus worried the thought in his mind for a moment before breaking.

"Tell me," he said, after taking another second to gauge Dazai's state. When he received no response save for a pressed frown, Severus asked, "have you seen Professor McGonagall recently?"

Dazai gave his wand an agitated-looking flick. Severus eyed the movement, but it was clear Dazai was trying to keep his wand controlled now. It barely shifted even an inch before falling back into his lap.

"I only *think* about skipping class," Dazai teased, voice deceptively light. Severus' frown deepened. Could he not see how the boy was still so clearly on edge, he would have been completely fooled into believing Dazai was unshaken. Something rankled and soured in Severus' gut, but Dazai was still talking, unknowing. "I don't actually do it."

"...Good," Severus measured his words carefully, unsure as to how much of that he actually believed.

"I promise!" Dazai protested. "While everyone else got to practice some really cool spell, I was supposed to be writing an essay. Class is so boring these days."

"She told you to write an essay, but did you actually write it, Problem Child?"

Dazai ignored him. The answer was obvious without clarification, anyway. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, he asked, "are you snooping on your fellow faculty, professor?

Severus bristled, but, despite himself, found he couldn't hold onto that irritation. The longer they bantered and bickered, the more color slowly returned to Dazai's face. He let out a peeved breath. "This hardly concerns you. Unless you want to cast the same spell for the rest of the year, I suggest you stop prying and start focusing."

“Well, then don’t ask me about Professor McGonagall in the first place. Now you’ve got me all curious.”

Snape rubbed at his temples, soothing the headache that seemed to be ever present these days. Poppy’s headache potions—or his own, for that matter—had no power over the people causing him pain, after all. Damn Gilderoy.

He dropped his hand to stare at Dazai across the desk.

Dazai was still absentmindedly fiddling with his wand. The light in his eyes seemed faraway, and Severus mutely wondered at what the boy was thinking over. But his whole demeanor had lightened from... earlier.

Was it only a lapse in focus that had caused the boy to flinch so terribly, then? Either way, it sent the guilty pit in Severus’ stomach working overtime.

Guilt because he had been the one to startle Dazai.

Then guilt, a hundred times deeper and stickier, because he still hadn’t been able to do anything about the suspected *cause* of those flinches.

“Anyway, if you’re going to snoop on someone, it should be Professor Lockhart.”

Severus blinked. “Why? Has he done something?”

“Lockhart is Lockhart,” Dazai said sagely. “Is that not awful enough? Honestly...”

Severus snorted. It was unbecoming, but Dazai grinned toothily in return, regardless.

Before Severus could decide between telling Dazai off for speaking badly of his superior—or expressing his deepest sympathies to Gilderoy’s least favorite pupil, Dazai suddenly gave himself a firm nod. Then, with a tight flick of his wand, Dazai cast, *“Verdimillious!”*

Severus straightened up abruptly.

Bright green sparks sputtered at the end of Dazai’s wand. It was far from a perfect cast, but...

Severus’ eyes snapped immediately to Dazai—the green lights somewhat impressive, but not the most important thing at the moment. He looked Dazai up and down.

He was wide-eyed and wire a small *O* on his lips.

Severus’ eyes narrowed.

Dazai seemed to have anticipated the objections wetting Severus’ tongue. He let out a reedy-sounding breath. “That was satisfactory,” Dazai decided for himself.

“Put your wand down,” Severus told him. “And don’t cast without warning me.” He half-leaned forward to get a closer look at the boy’s face, but stopped short with a pressed frown instead of getting any nearer. “Are you nauseous? Does your head hurt?”

The last few green flickers of light burned brightly for just a second more before dying out completely. One fizzed out in his tea, and Severus eyed it with distaste.

Obediently, Dazai set his wand down on the desk between them. The point was squared off to the edge, precise.

“I feel alright.”

Severus raised a disbelieving brow.

“I do!” Dazai protested, a petulant pout covering the boy's previously wide-eyed visage.

It was a stark contrast to earlier, when Severus had reached out—

He pressed his fingertips into the desk. The tips turned red, then white from the pressure.

“My stomach didn’t even turn!” Dazai explained. He sounded distressingly pleased with what should have been a normal sentiment. “I was just surprised, is all.”

Severus looked him over once more before asking, “surprised?”

“That it worked,” Dazai said. “I kind of forgot what *Verdimillious* feels—*uh,* how to cast it.”

Severus commented on Dazai’s slip-up with only a quirked brow and a dull frown.

“But you feel okay?”

“Weirdly, yeah.”

“Not hurting shouldn’t be weird at all.”

Severus squinted, hoping to glean some truth in Dazai’s expression. After a moment of searching, however, he was forced to concede. Dazai was an expert at controlling his expressions, unfortunately. Though Severus considered himself something of an expert at decoding the boy’s ticks by now, he admittedly could find no discomfort on his face save for what had already been there before.

“...Good, Severus said, haltingly. He was hyper-aware of just how quickly a feeling of *alright* could turn into one of *I’m about to pass out.* Especially with an illness so unknown as Dazai’s. Before Dazai could perk up too excitedly, he continued, “Let’s stop here for today.”

“Wha—?” Dazai pushed forward in his seat. “But I did it correctly! You said I could move onto *Wingardium Leviosa.* Unless...” he trailed off, voice taking on a scandalous quality, “unless Professor Snape is a liar.”

Snape silenced him with a raised hand and a frown. Dazai sat back immediately, but didn’t look particularly cowed.

“Don’t raise your voice.”

Dazai sniffed. "...Right."

Not an apology. But Severus knew better than to even try with this one.

Severus reached for his mug when he suddenly recalled having seen Dazai's spell sputter out in it. Aborting the motion, Severus instead pinched the bridge of his nose. It soothed none of his nerves but did stand to focus his thoughts a little. "Next week we will move onto the levitation spell."

Dazai's eyes brightened. *"Ah,* maybe you're not as boring as I thought, after all!"

Severus ignored him. "We will work slowly. If at all you feel sick—" he paused, an idea suddenly popping to mind, "—we will stop. In fact, perhaps I will invite Poppy to join our next few lessons to keep an eye on things."

It was a good—no a *great* idea. Should it prove too soon to move Dazai onto stronger spells, the matron would notice immediately. Moreover, Poppy might notice something Severus had missed in the boy's behavior, as she had last time. Regarding his health, home life, or Quirrell...

"In the meantime, you should keep practicing the *Motus Subtilis* spell," he nodded. "You may put your wand away now, boy."

While Dazai returned his wand to the case he kept in his book bag, Severus inspected his now-cooled mug of tea. Sure enough, minuscule flecks of green... something were floating on the surface. Remnants of Dazai's spell, no doubt. Severus had no intention of ingesting whatever magical energy could make sparks out of thin air. With a dismissive wave and a muttered spell, he levitated the mug to the other desk. The last thing he wanted was to accidentally drink it in the middle of research later.

Dazai looked up just as Severus was casting the spell. His eyes tracked the mug's path through the air, narrowed slightly as if in deep concentration.

The mug landed with a *clink* somewhere behind him.

Severus leveled Dazai with a contemplative look. The spell he'd just cast—*Wingardium Leviosa*—still faintly lingered on his skin. It was only the barest of pin-prickle sensations. He'd been feeling specifically for it, otherwise the sensation would have entirely passed his focus.

Dazai's acute eyes had tracked the spell across the room, as if only the spell's whispered had screamed out at him.

Perhaps it had.

Severus sighed. He silently vowed to bring the observation up with Poppy when they met later.

In the meantime...

“How has school been treating you?”

Dazai blinked. Hands still buried in his bag, Dazai paused, then pulled his textbook out. He set it on his lap. “I already told you I don’t skip class,” Dazai puffed, indignant. “Snape has no faith in me.”

“Professor Snape,” he corrected. Dazai flapped a hand, not looking in the slightest told-off. Brat. “Class is only a fraction of the school-experience,” Severus explained with a level gaze. “Given the circumstances, I expect this year has been quite difficult for you.”

Severus’ own school experience with bullies had left him more than a little pained at the time —even now, the memories left a bitter taste on his tongue. He couldn’t even imagine how terrible Dazai’s daily life was dragging out to be.

After all, the buzz around the Demon Student story had still yet to die down. If anything, it only grew stronger by the day. With the petrification, things had only grown worse. If Severus didn’t know any better, he’d say the Daily Prophet was actively trying to ruin Dazai’s life. Or otherwise that *someone* certainly had it out for the boy.

And, much to Severus’ great annoyance, Albus’ so-called statement to the press regarding Mrs. Norris’ petrification was less than specific.

‘Hogwarts is investigating this matter seriously,’ he’d told the reporter. Followed, in due fashion, by an excess of appeasing but overall worthless sentiments.

(Would it kill Albus to tell the press they were fairly certain Dazai wasn’t the culprit?!

At this point, Severus was genuinely asking.)

“The school’s opinion of you by-and-large is less than favorable,” Severus said. He saw no need to dance around the subject. Dazai was more attentive than his boyish attitude let on. “As always, if you need somewhere to turn, Poppy’s and my offices are always open to you.”

“What a weird offer,” Dazai mumbled under his breath.

Unclear if he was meant to hear that or not, Severus merely watched the boy’s shifting expression in silence.

After a second, Dazai smiled amusedly. “Professor Snape is always fussing.” He tapped out a seemingly random pattern over the cover of his book. “I have everything under control. Even if everyone decides to hunt me down and kill me, I think Blaise would still have my back.”

Severus shivered. The needlessly cruel imagery turned his stomach.

“Are things that serious?” He asked, trying to keep his tone flat. He'd been working to keep an eye on Dazai, but it was inevitable some things would slip his notice. And though he’d heard plenty of people talk bad about his problem child, he’d yet to see any physical threats.

Dazai paused, seeming to contemplate something for a moment before plainly suggesting, “Pansy is the worst of the lot. It would be a great favor to me if you could have her expelled.”

Severus considered him. Unconsciously, his eyes roamed Dazai's body for bruises again, only to find nothing of the sort.

"I was under the impression the two of you were in some sort of club."

Dazai's lips quirked up slightly.

"I guess that's too much to ask..." he trailed off. "Well, at the very least you can tell me if you've figured out who petrified the cat."

Severus immediately shot him a quelling glare. *"No.* And I thought I told you to stay out of that investigation."

"Did you? I don't recall." Dazai shrugged. "I am staying out of it though! I'm only asking, since everyone is pretty sure *I* did it. If you won't expel anyone for me, you can at least help prove my innocence! I'm sure that would get a few people off my back... You know, I probably deserve to know how the investigation is going more than anyone else because of that."

A few people...

Severus frowned. Students were *definitely* giving Dazai a hard time, then. As the head of Dazai's house, Severus couldn't help but feel he'd have to give them all a talking to. This was at least partially his own fault, after all, and certainly fell under his responsibility to correct.

But more importantly—

"Stay out of it," Severus repeated.

"Boo! Professor Snape is no fair."

Severus watched Dazai for a moment longer. The boy had a lip puckered out childishly and a rosy youthfulness to his cheeks. He'd seen all number of expressions on Dazai's face in the past, but each one of them always seemed just adjacent to the truth.

Even now, Severus couldn't shake that feeling.

A boy he doesn't understand, from a city he understands even less—

"Just stay out of trouble, Problem Child," he said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. To himself, Severus quietly grumbled, *"after everything last year, one would think you'd mellow out a bit."*

Severus had anticipated it as much as he had feared it. After all, no one could experience what Dazai went through and just bounce back unscathed.

But, in the end, Dazai was just as much of a cheerful menace as he had been back then. The only difference was that now the entire magical community seemed to view him as a threat.

Despite himself, Severus still couldn’t tell how Dazai felt about the whole situation. The boy bounced between uncaring, excited, then worried at the drop of a hat.

If he was being honest, Severus wasn’t quite sure how he felt, either.

Angry, certainly.

Concerned, definitely.

And perhaps... Suspicious, too.

Dazai grinned at him from across the desk.

He was still rapping his fingers over the textbook’s cover, yet to really open it. Severus mutely wondered if Dazai had already finished reading it weeks ago. After their previous lessons, Severus wasn’t sure if Dazai hadn’t *memorized* it, even.

“I always stay out of trouble,” Dazai cheerfully lied. “I think it just has a way of sneaking up on me.”

Chapter End Notes

hello everyone!! thanks for reading, commenting, etc! and happy birthday!!
shout out to everyone who was getting antsy in the comments about this week's chapter going up a little bit later in the day than usual. yall. i was just busy ;_;

next up: dazai, blaise, and hermione go to a quidditch game together

Dazai Gets into Trouble

Chapter Summary

The first Quidditch game Dazai has ever been to - featuring immediate shenanigans.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Dazai,” Mori had written.

His script was a swirling cursive as always, dotted with hearts and dashed with some of Elise’s doodles. But, despite the mess Mori had made of the letter, the paper was expensive and cleanly cut. Mori was dangerous whether he was signing his name with a heart or holding a knife to your throat.

"Apologies for the late response, dear, but that owl of yours tore up my papers again. What have I said about getting it trained? At this rate, I'll be forced to put it down. And how will we talk then? I can't bear the thought of you not getting my letters!" Mori's letter begun. Then,

“I’m glad to hear you’re making at least some level of progress with Lucius’ test. The sooner you finish, the sooner the Port Mafia can get to work with other endeavors. I expect concrete results soon. And while you’re at it, do keep a tight leash on Lucius’ son. It’s good to keep our options open. We’re all counting on you! You know failure is unacceptable, Osamu.”

Followed by a big, red heart. It must have been drawn in one of Elise’s markers, because Dazai didn’t think it was done in blood. The ruby color was still too vivid, and not at all faded to the sickly-looking brown of old blood. Not that he would put it past the doctor.

“In the meantime, I’ve been keeping tabs on the Daily Prophet’s reports regarding you. You’re turning into quite the menace over there! Don’t let it get to your head, now. Despite what everyone has to say about you, I’m certain you aren’t half the menace at Hogwarts that you are back home. No one knows you better than I do, after all.

That said, I’m sure everyone is giving you a hard time over there. Why don’t you make some trouble for your professors in return? Just try not to get yourself expelled in the meantime, Osamu.”

Dazai sniffed.

Mori was being a hassle, like always.

Of *course* Dazai was going to do his best on this job! Of *course* he was going to try and get it done as quickly as possible! Of *course* he was keeping an eye on Draco!

Dazai skimmed the rest of the letter with a frown. Mori went on to ask for an update on the petrification, made an inquiry as to what the staff was currently up to, and requested a report on Dazai's progress in spell-casting.

He sighed and folded the letter up. Despite himself, Dazai wasn't feeling particularly annoyed with Mori.

More... discomforted.

"I trust you're keeping those silly self-destructive habits of yours to a minimum," Mori had signed off, *"M."*

...he was keeping under control just fine. The job came first, obviously.

Dazai's fingers twitched.

Hoot!

Dazai blinked out of his thoughts. He sat up and turned a blank eye onto Featherbrain.

She gave another trilling hoot, evidently having something to say. At her side, lounging across the desk, Egg blew out a puff of smoke. It ruffled Featherbrain's chest feathers and made her look wild and unkempt. She squawked at the dragon.

"I can't understand a thing you're saying," Dazai drawled, creasing the letter and slipping it into the desk drawer. Only once it was shut did he look back at the squabbling owl and dragon.

At some point, Featherbrain had taken to the air, flapping her wings around angrily. Egg lazily bared her teeth. A half-hearted threat.

"But if you were saying how awful Mori is, then you're right. He really is the worst... I know how to do my job, you know. He doesn't have to keep reminding me..."

Featherbrain hooted. She landed back at Dazai's side with a ruffle of her messy feathers.

Egg yawned, curling herself into a smaller ball on the desk.

She was getting big, Dazai noticed. Bigger already than she was just last week. Sooner or later, that was going to be a problem. Dragons didn't exactly stay small enough to keep indoors for long. And Dazai wasn't sure how much longer this magical room could accommodate her rapidly increasing size.

Something to worry about when Egg was too big to share the couch with him, Dazai supposed. As it was, he had more pressing things to stress over right now.

Dazai leaned into his hand with a put-upon sigh.

"He's so annoying. Can't Mori just tell me what he's really planning with this place? Or better yet, stop sending me letters and I'll figure it out on my own." He grumbled into his

palm.

Featherbrain made a sound that might have been agreement.

Letting out a breath, Dazai rubbed a finger over the owl's beak. She preened happily at the attention.

Suddenly, Egg's tail smacked against the desk. It wobbled under her weight.

Featherbrain screeched and shot into the air again.

Dazai only rolled his eyes. "Don't be jealous," he chided. He flicked Egg on the nose, and she whined. "You sleep with me. That's more than enough closeness for the two of us."

Dazai eyed the two animals for another second, feeling almost content now with Mori's letter out of sight. The feeling wouldn't last long, of course. He'd have to write his reply sooner than not.

Still. In the meantime, Dazai did have something much more important to be doing.

Right on cue, someone rapped against the office door.

Blaise swung the door open half-way through his greeting knocks—a rhythmic pattern Dazai matched on the underside of his desk. His eyes found Dazai at the desk immediately, only quietly roving over Egg and Featherbrain for a second.

Dazai waved hello.

"I thought you'd be in here," Blaise said. "...are you are working on something in here, Boss?"

"Like what?" Dazai asked with a snort. "I'm letting you and all run the next test scam by yourselves. Unless you need a helping hand?" He wiggled his fingers.

Blaise stared at him for a moment before finally shaking his head. "The twins are already working on that."

"Good for them! Keep me updated."

"Right," Blaise said. He glanced away for a split second before looking back to Dazai. "Are you ready? The game is starting in a few minutes. I know you wanted to avoid the crowd, but if we wait any longer, we'll miss the beginning."

"Is it?" Dazai asked. He leaned back in his seat to peer out the window, but the stained glass belied nothing. It was sunny outside, but the season was turning. Dazai could already feel a slight chill through the glass.

Blaise merely hummed. He waited for Dazai at the door, watching as he stood and slowly crossed the room. Dazai plucked a striped scarf from the couch as he passed. He wrapped it around his neck three times.

Egg stood as well, arching her spiny back into a long stretch.

Dazai tutted. “You stay here,” he told the dragon. “I don’t need McGonagall or Snape yelling at me for keeping a dragon around.”

When Egg deflated with a whine, Featherbrain let out a cheery chirp. The owl made a proud perch of Dazai’s shoulder.

“No bickering, you two.”

“...huh.”

Dazai frowned, looking away from Egg and Featherbrain—who were seemingly locked in a silent battle of *“who’s Dazai’s favorite pet”*—to see Blaise watching them oddly.

“’Huh’ what?” Dazai sniffed as he stepped out from the office and into the hall.

A second later, Blaise followed him. The door shut behind them, then magically disappeared a second later.

“You’re just getting along surprisingly well with them, is all,” Blaise said, pointing his chin to where Featherbrain had started to clean up her ruffled feathers. “After seeing how you were with Featherbrain last year I wouldn’t have thought it possible.”

Dazai shrugged. He was actually feeling about the same level of bewilderment himself.

A pet enjoyer. *Dazai.* Who would have thought.

“The quidditch match today—it's Gryffindor versus Slytherin, isn’t it?” Dazai asked instead. “Which team are we rooting for?”

Blaise hummed. “Whichever team you want, I suppose. I’ll be cheering Draco on, naturally. But the Weasleys will be playing as well.” He paused, briefly, to consider. But after a second, he conceded, “Well, we can’t cheer very loud either way. Hermione is saving us seats by the professors’ booth, since they tend to be more empty. And rumor has it, Professor Snape gives detentions to anyone nearby who yells too loud.”

“Can he do that?” Dazai asked. Then, “I bet he’d let *me* yell as loudly as I liked.”

“Stay out of trouble.”

“Ah, if you say so.”

Blaise shot him a look something both deeply unamused and fond. Dazai grinned cheerfully back.

They continued to chat as they walked, about one thing or another. Dazai was pleased to hear their test scam was going well and that the profits had been split evenly amongst the gang. Their next target was looking to be Professor Binns, if only for the fact that going after

Lockhart every time might draw suspicions. Even if that was the more personally satisfying option.

Dazai walked with a bounce in his step, Mori momentarily forgotten. And with the halls mostly empty at the moment, he could put that out of mind as well.

For now, at least.

There was a part of Dazai's brain that could never quite let go of work. The part of him that was dyed mafia black, and the part of him that even now kept his smile pointed at the edges.

The part of him Blaise didn't know about.

But Dazai's cheerful gait didn't falter even when that particularly poisonous thought crossed his mind.

The stadium was loud.

Very, *very* loud.

And it only grew louder the closer they got. Seeming to share his discomfort, Featherbrain suddenly squawked. A second later, she flew off of Dazai's shoulder and disappeared back in the direction of the school. Dazai couldn't blame her.

The bleachers were packed, students shoulder-to-shoulder. Despite all the cheering, screaming, and rioting, Dazai was almost surprised to see no fights were breaking out. Even from a distance, he could see everyone looked excited. Happy. The bleachers were massive and surrounding the entire field—which must have been several foot-ball fields long. A quarter of the audience was green, another red, then blue, then yellow.

It was obvious to Dazai why the green group—Slytherin students—were seated as far away as possible from the red group—Gryffindor students.

"Over here," Blaise called, nearly yelling to be heard over the audience.

Dazai nodded stiffly and followed Blaise past the field's main entrance. They walked around half the field before, finally, Blaise led them to one of the furthest bleachers. This one, notably, didn't bear students from any one house in particular. Dazai saw a smattering of blue Ravenclaw ties, a poppy yellow scarf, a red bow—

"Hermione!" Dazai greeted with a smile.

"There you two are!" Hemione said as she stood. She waved them over, red scarf flapping with the energetic movement. "I was worried you weren't going to make it!"

Blaise started across the bleachers, pushing through the other seated students on the way. But there wasn't much need for a guide at this point—the second the others heard Dazai call, people had nervously shifted away. Some went so far as to jump out of their seats. Still, remembering his last interaction with Tracey and Millicent made Dazai want to stick close regardless.

When they finally made it up to the top of the stands, the trio sat down. Hermione and Blaise bracketed him on either side, and Dazai made a show of getting comfortable. The picture of serenity, despite all the people tripping over one another to avoid him.

"I'll just ask Marcy for an update on who won later... let's get out of here before the demon sees us!"

"Hurry up, Collin!"

Someone squeaked, and a second later three spots in front of Dazai miraculously emptied out. A young Gryffindor boy—Collin, Dazai presumed—hastily tried to follow them without breaking his camera. He stumbled before vanishing a second later behind his friends.

Hermione and Blaise both shot Dazai worried glances, but all the mafioso did in response was rest his feet up on the now-vacated seats. After a moment, Blaise did the same.

"Usually the seats are so crowded, it's uncomfortable," he commented.

"Really?" Dazai snorted. "Lucky you for having me around then."

Hermione, who's feet were still firmly planted on the ground, shifted nervously in place. She fruitlessly tried to smooth down a wayward curl. "I really can't believe everyone is treating you like that, Dazai! The professors should do something about it."

Dazai brushed her off.

The professors were doing something about it. Kind of. At the very least, Lockhart was doing something (read: coaxing the bullies on). Dazai also hadn't forgotten Snape's invitation for safe-haven, if needed.

He sniffed.

Dazai's eyes found the field below. Cheering erupted as the Gryffindor and Slytherin teams began to enter the stadium. Wincing, Dazai slapped a hand over his right ear. It barely smothered the obnoxious yelling at all.

From this far, Dazai could barely make out the team uniforms, but he was able to spot the Weasleys. Ginger hair made them an easy target. Draco was a little harder to find, but after a moment of squinting, Dazai managed to spot him near the front of the green-colored team.

"I'm sure Dazai has everything under control," Blaise said after a second.

Hermione turned to him disbelievingly.

"He always has a plan," Blaise continued. "Anyway, he knows we have his back if he needs us."

Dazai's eyes snapped off of the field below to face Blaise. As always, the other Slytherin's expression was matter-of-fact. But the second he saw how Dazai had one hand clamped over his ear, Blaise's brows pulled together.

"Oh," Blaise said. He sounded almost apologetic. “Quidditch matches are always packed. But Pansy says the first and last matches of the year are always especially bad.”

“This is awful. At least twice as loud as a pipe bomb.”

Blaise blinked. “A what?”

"Not as dangerous, though. But suicide via pipe bomb sounds messy."

Hermione bumped into his shoulder. She waited until she had Dazai’s full focus. “We can leave if it’s too much. I’m sure the others would understand if you couldn’t watch their first match.”

Dazai shook his head, then hesitantly let his hand fall flat on his lap. “Not until I see someone bleed or break a bone or something. Blaise told me quidditch is a blood sport!”

“I’m sure I never said that.”

“It’s true! I have a near perfect memory, you know.”

“Then why can’t you find your way around the school, Dazai?”

“I said *near perfect,* not—”

A shadow fell across Dazai’s face. He craned around to see Professor Snape, arms crossed, standing behind him.

“Get your feet off of the seats,” Snape said, eyes narrowed.

Blaise quickly complied and Hermione, who hadn’t even attempted to set her feet up, immediately straightened in her spot.

Dazai beamed. *“Oh!”* He perked up. “Snape is here too! Good afternoon, professor.”

“Feet down, Mr. Dazai.”

Dazai poked his tongue out, but did drop his feet to the floor with a smack shortly after. Snape nodded and took his own seat a second later.

His own seat, which was the one behind Dazai’s own.

“You’re sitting with us!” Dazai cheered. “I knew you liked me!”

Snape’s glare was strong enough to sear through solid concrete.

“That’s where the staff always sit, Dazai,” Hermione squeaked nervously into his ear.

“What, directly behind us?” Dazai asked, cheeky. “He’s *Professor Snape,* he can sit wherever he wants.”

Hermione blinked. She glanced back at Snape before turning to her lap. “Well, I guess that is true...”

Before any one of them could get another word out, a loud, screeching whistle suddenly blew. At the sound, the teams below suddenly took off on their brooms, shooting into the air at break-neck speeds. The little, colored dots Dazai had previously identified as Fred, George, Ron, and Draco turned into nothing more than blurry smudges across the sky.

A second later, a booming voice announced over the stands, “AND THEY’RE OFF! SLYTHERIN TAKES THE LEAD WITH—”

“And here I thought quidditch couldn’t get any louder,” Dazai grumbled into his cloak. But he popped back up a second later. “But I can see what you mean about it being bloody—”

“No one said that.”

“—with how fast they’re going, even a minor collision could cause serious damage!”

Just as the words left his mouth, Dazai watched either Fred or George smack a hefty, metal ball out of the air just seconds before it collided with another player’s skull. The crowd cheered all around.

It was only thanks to the quidditch lesson everyone had given him on the train earlier this year that Dazai could follow the game at all. Slytherin scored a swift few points, then Gryffindor scored double that in half the time. But within the next minute, the scoreboard was flipped again. Quidditch was an awfully fast-paced game, Dazai realized.

It was also, if he recalled correctly, a mostly futile endeavor.

Just as he was thinking this, a blur of gold streaked across Dazai’s vision. He tracked the zipping dot easily. It jumped around the stands, in the air hundreds of feet above, just inches off the ground. The Golden Snitch. Whoever caught it functionally won the game. That job fell to each team’s Seeker, which in this case, included Draco and some Gryffindor Dazai had never met. Dazai still wasn’t sure why the other players bothered showing up at all.

But Blaise and Hermione both watched the game avidly. Hermione was leaned forward in her seat and let out a whooping cheer whenever Ron did a particularly impressive maneuver to guard the goalpost.

Beside him, Blaise also had his eyes locked on the game. His cheering was much more subdued—limited to a few appreciative claps whenever anyone scored.

Curious, Dazai craned his neck around to see what sort of audience member Snape was.

Only to find Snape wasn’t even watching the game at all.

Instead, he was turned to his side, grumbling something tiredly to Professor McGonagall, who must have shown up when Dazai’s focus was elsewhere. Now that he was looking, actually, Dazai noticed Professors Vector, Trelawney, and Sprout were seated nearby as well.

Madam Pomfrey was nowhere to be seen—probably on the ground where she could offer medical aid if any of the players needed it.

Seeming to sense the eyes on him, Snape's mouth snapped shut and he whirled to glare into Dazai.

"What."

Dazai raised his hands, placating. "Just looking around!"

Snape's eyes narrowed, clearly disbelieving. At his side, McGonagall's brows were furrowed as she looked Dazai up and down. She seemed to be contemplating him. Given Dazai's track record with professors in general, that couldn't possibly be good news.

"Although, you don't seem very interested in the game either, Snape," Dazai continued, smiling to himself when Snape immediately corrected him with a tight-lipped '*that's professor to you.*' "Are you bored?"

Snape raised a brow. For a second, Dazai waited to be told off. But all Snape did was to sigh. "I find this whole ordeal to be rather unnecessary."

Dazai lifted a brow of his own.

"Nonsense, Severus. You simply have no team spirit," McGonagall chided. Then, her gaze turned to where the Gryffindor student body was seated. "Though, if I could have it my way, plenty of these kids would be inside studying rather than..."

"Rather than screaming their fool heads off," Snape grumbled agreement.

"Poor Severus is just afraid Slytherin is going to lose horribly," Vector drawled from her seat a few feet away. She waved her bright-red robes around lazily. "Which they will. Obviously."

Trelawney patted the arithmancy professor's arm. "No need to start a fight, now."

"You're only saying that because you already Saw who wins."

Trelawney smiled, but said nothing. The other professors shared a glance, then sighed as one.

Meanwhile, Dazai watched them chat with new eyes.

The last time he'd seen them all together, everyone had been... less nice. A lot more tense, really. And altogether more desperately trying to evict him from the school's premises. But that clearly wasn't the case now. It would be nice—amazing, even—if they could keep up this pleasant atmosphere, so next time Dazai waltzed into trouble they might have his back a little.

A smirk crept along his face.

"Wanna bet?"

Everyone's eyes snapped to him.

Snape's eyes narrowed in blatant suspicion. "What?"

Dazai flipped around so he was sitting backwards in the seat, giving the staff his full attention. "I said *wanna bet?"* He grinned Vector's way. "If you're so sure Gryffindor is going to win, then you'll put money on it, won't you?"

She stared at him, mouth dropping open on instinct. She blinked several times.

"Ignore him," Snape said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Mr. Dazai is just trying to cause problems."

"Actually, I'm trying to make my professors gamble—"

"My point stands."

Dazai's cheeks puffed. "You are absolutely no fun."

Vector cleared her throat, and Snape and Dazai both turned to look at her. She seemed to have recovered from her earlier surprise.

"You're twelve. What can you possibly bet with?"

"Money?" Dazai said, smile returning. "I don't know. What do you want?"

She hummed, as if really considering it.

Snape looked between them, eyes frighteningly wide. "No. You are not humoring him, Septima."

Vector ignored him.

"No. Stop."

Sprout leaned forward in her seat. "If I may? Mr. Dazai has a horrible track record for not turning in assignments. Perhaps, should he lose, he'll have to turn in all of this month's homework."

Vector blinked. Even Severus' desperate attempt to mitigate disaster halted at that.

"You don't do your homework?" Vector turned an asking eye onto Dazai. "Why are you at this game? You should be in detention."

Dazai waved her off and turned to Sprout instead. She was clearly the better in. "Well, what do I get if I win, then?"

"Hey, brat—"

Snape shook his head, stopping Vector pre-tirade. His whole being oozed resignation.

Meanwhile, Sprout seemed to be genuinely considering the question.

Dazai waited, amusedly, but also a bit curious at what the herbology professor would suggest. He was fairly sure real money was off the table. Actually gambling with a student was probably a little too morally corrupt for any one of the Hogwarts staff to engage in. But they didn't seem to be above bartering *actions*.

Well, whatever it was didn't really matter, Dazai supposed. It was just amusing to watch them squirm.

"If you win..." Sprout hummed, "I won't give you a detention next time you fail to answer a single question on a test."

Vector's eyes bugged.

Snape ran a hand down his face, haggard.

"Really!?" Dazai grinned, bouncing in his seat a little. "Well, I don't actually mind detention as long as it's not with Professor Lockhart, but I guess that's still a good reward."

At the mention of Lockhart, all the teachers wore similar, if brief, grimaces. Dazai sympathized greatly.

"Can this prize extend to my other classes as well?"

"No," Snape and McGonagall said immediately.

Dazai *boo-ed.*

Blaise sighed, deep and tired right in his ear. Dazai had to slide back into his seat to meet his friend's eyes.

"Are you still not taking tests, Dazai?"

"Obviously," he said. Then, he conceded, "maybe if they were more fun."

Blaise shook his head, disapproving, at the same time Hermione let out an aggrieved gasp.

"Dazai, *no!* I knew you didn't do homework—much to my complaint, of course—" she said, quickly glancing to the gathered professors then back, "but this is really just—"

Dazai blew a raspberry at her.

"—very childish," she finished pointedly.

"That's just how Dazai is," Blaise said. Then, looking quickly between Dazai and the professors, he quietly added, "I can't believe you actually got them to bet at all." He sounded a little impressed.

Preening, Dazai turned his focus back to the game.

Gryffindor had a clear lead, but that didn't put Slytherin out of the game. They could either really start scoring in the latter half of the game, or...

Dazai found Draco circling the field several dozens of feet above the other players.

It was too far to make out Draco's expression, but Dazai would bet money he was carefully searching for the golden snitch. The walnut-sized golden ball was nowhere to be found anymore. But if anyone could pick it out, it would be Draco.

Well, Dazai could probably find it as well. But while Draco's training came from years of being a wealthy kid who idolized quidditch, Dazai's came from sharpshooting training with Hirotsu.

Thinking this, Dazai let his eyes wander across the field and over the stands. When no flash of gold immediately caught his eye this time, Dazai gave up.

Something much more interesting caught his attention instead.

Dazai felt like the entire world had zoomed in, singling out a single person just a few rows away. Red hair caught in the sun made her look like a blaze.

Ginny Weasley smiled politely at something her older brother, Percy, said.

Ginny.

The current center of one of Dazai's most pressing problems.

If Dazai's reasoning was correct, then she was responsible for the petrification. And, by extension, was a core piece in Lucius' test. Figuring Ginny out was only the first step, though. Now was the ever-important question: *what do I do with this information?*

He could talk to her. Currently, this was Dazai's main plan. Torturing her for information was off the table, given the setting. And merely keeping an eye on Ginny wasn't certain to yield results. No—he'd have to pull her aside and confront her on Lucius and the petrification of Mrs. Norris. Whatever information she had would have to be enough.

Dazai had worked with less before.

Of course, he'd also had brutal, bloody violence to fall on as a backup. But that would definitely get him expelled—possibly arrested. Also...

Dazai cast a surreptitious glance to where Fred and George were circling overhead, then to Ron at the goalposts.

"Gryffindor is definitely going to win," Hermione said proudly. A quick glance to the scoreboard revealed they were nearly a dozen points in the lead. "Sorry about your bet, Dazai."

"I concur," Vector said. "I'd suggest you start working on your assignments immediately, lest you fall behind."

Dazai forced himself from his thoughts with a shake of his head. He glanced one last time to Ginny before turned back to smile at the professors. “It’s not over yet!” Dazai protested. “Snape agrees with me!”

“Professor Snape doesn’t condone encouraging students to gamble.”

“Which is exactly why none of the students like you, Sir.”

Blaise elbowed him gently. “I think Draco will pull through for you.”

“Me too,” Dazai said with a confident-looking nod. He cupped a hand around his mouth as if to shout, then asked Blaise, "Do you think he’d be mad if I cheered?”

“I think everyone would hate that.”

Dazai dropped his hands. “You’re probably right.”

But it seemed Draco didn’t need his encouragement anyway. A second later, Draco’s broom suddenly dived straight for the ground. A chorus mixed with cheers and screams followed his descent. At the last second, Draco snapped upright. He zoomed forward, steering around other players.

Dazai saw the flash of gold a second later.

Draco had found the snitch!

Having seen the commotion, however, the Gryffindor seeker was now hot on Draco’s tail. It was anyone’s game now.

Dazai turned to make a cheeky comment to Vector. But before he could fully face her, someone caught Dazai’s eye for the second time that day. He stuttered to a stop.

Ginny was leaving.

She had stood up at some point while Dazai was distracted and had begun making her way across the stands. Her bookbag was gripped tightly in her hands. Percy watched her go with a noticeable frown on his face, but he didn’t go after her. Instead, curiously, he glanced back to the staff area. Dazai briefly caught his eyes, but they both looked away just as fast.

He should—

Dazai should go and talk to Ginny. Now.

The sounds of cheers roared up around him, but Dazai no longer had eyes for the game.

Where was Ginny going so suddenly?

The uncertainty mingled with suspicion in Dazai’s gut.

There were plenty of reasonable things Ginny could be running off to do. But Dazai couldn't shake the dubious feeling that Ginny was up to something. Sneaking off right at the peak of her brothers' game...

Another petrification? Dazai thought with narrowed eyes. *Or something benign?* He watched as Ginny stumbled over another student's leg, as if she hadn't noticed their presence even when she was right on top of them.

The student barked angrily at her, but Ginny didn't even blink as she continued to lumber towards the stairs. Dazai's eyes narrowed as he tracked the odd movement.

Something was up, for sure.

Dazai was on his feet before he knew it.

"Dazai?"

"Where are you going?"

Dazai spared his friends only a brief glance. He couldn't exactly tell them the truth. He'd sworn himself to only involve Draco in mafia matters...

"Bathroom," Dazai called over his shoulder as he hurried out of the row. *"Uh,* keep an eye on who wins for me."

"Wha—Dazai!" Hermione sputtered behind him.

Dazai waved vaguely behind him, but otherwise didn't spare his friends any more attention. The Port Mafia always came first. And with Mori's latest letter currently burning a hole in his desk, Dazai knew that the doctor was wanting more tangible results soon.

And his current best lead had just disappeared behind the bleachers!

Dazai picked up his pace, feet taking the stands two-at-a-time. Jeers and surprised shouts followed him out of the bleachers. He paid them no mind. The sound of Mori's coaching words in his head were louder still.

Time for some real answers.

-

The stands went quiet at Dazai's sudden departure, as though unsure how to proceed. Blaise easily understood his own befuddlement, but the rest of the crowd... It was as if they hadn't taken their focus off of the Demon Student since he arrived; now that he was gone, they weren't quite sure where to put their energy. Discontent swirled in Blaise's gut, unfortunately familiar.

Blaise stared after where Dazai had disappeared to, brows furrowed some in consternation.

Around them, the game continued unknowing. Draco dipped low to the ground, then spun to dodge the other seeker's mid-air twist. Blaise barely paid it any mind.

That whole exchange left an odd flavor in his mouth. Because he knew Dazai. Probably better than anyone else here. And that abrupt goodbye? Strange. It reeked of... something.

A lot about Dazai had that kind of deceptive quality to it.

Searching, Blaise looked around for any indication of what may have sent Dazai off so suddenly. He found nothing. After the game had started in full swing, even the harsh glares had mostly died off. Anyway, Dazai clearly wasn't one to scare easily. Maybe he really did just need to use the restroom.

Behind them, a few professors were still blinking, dumbfounded, at Dazai's hasty retreat. Most of them looked just as confused as Blaise felt, but others—Snape and McGonagall, namely—were looking off with considering looks on their faces.

"No need to look so serious," Hermione said lightly, "he only went to the bathroom."

Blaise tore himself from his thoughts. He turned to face her fully. "I'm sure," he said, not sounding sure at all.

She frowned. "Then what's that look for?"

"It's nothing. Just a feeling I have." He paused, wondering just what to say. It probably was just nothing. But that was the problem with Dazai—concerning little ticks had a tendency to actually relate to devastatingly large schemes. *Take last year's incident with Quirrell, for example...* Blaise sighed.

Hermione looked at him wearing an expression like she wasn't sure whether to relax back into her seat or alert the staff to an emergency-in-the-making.

"If this is anything like last year," Blaise explained his concerns aloud, "this is the part where Dazai withholds important information then runs off and gets himself into trouble."

Hermione stared, clearly not having expected Blaise's current train of thought. But, reliable as ever, her voice immediately dipped into one more suited to a conversation such as this.

"...isn't he *already* in trouble?" Hermione asked.

"My point exactly."

Hermione blinked owlishly. Something flickered across her expression. She must have come to some conclusion, or otherwise remembered something particularly vexing about Dazai's past exploits.

"That is... a little worrying," she said, haltingly. "Last year, out of nowhere, he came up to me wanting to sneak into—" Hermione paused abruptly. Her eyes flicked nervously to the staff

sitting behind them. Luckily, it seemed that they weren't paying their conversation any heed now that Dazai was gone. Say what you will about Dazai's less-than respectful personality—he had a way of stirring up excitement. With him gone, the staff had gone back to silently watching the game.

Hermione cleared her throat and continued, quieter now, "A-anyway, I do get the feeling he tends to have his own... things going on. *Uh,* dangerous things."

Things that his friends only got involved in once Dazai decided he needed an extra helping hand. Otherwise, he'd leave them perfectly in the dark.

Blaise was in the dark, now.

Then, Hermione was shaking her head. "I'm sure he's not up to anything too terrible. He said he was taking it easy this year," she said, referring to Dazai's outright refusal to investigate the petrification of Mrs. Norris. "I trust him."

"I do, too," Blaise said immediately. And he did. One-hundred percent.

But upset coiled in his stomach, sick with the feeling that Dazai didn't trust *him* in return.

Didn't seem to really trust *any* of his Hounds.

Things Dazai had done, had said—more importantly, what he avoided saying and doing...

Not giving their conversation any more unnecessary thought, Blaise got to his feet. Hermione jumped, surprised, and her eyes trailed up Blaise's frame until their eyes finally met.

"I'm going after him."

"If he really is just going to the bathroom—"

Blaise sniffed. "Then he's welcome to make fun of me for worrying too much up until we graduate."

Hermione's mouth settled into a thin line, but Blaise couldn't discern one-way-or-another just what was hiding behind that expression. "...I'll save your seats."

"Thank you."

Blaise nodded, then turned to leave. He spared the professors only a passing glance, and briefly met Professor Snape's eyes before looking away.

Blaise was so focused on following Dazai's path down the stairs, he didn't notice the second pair of steps fixedly trailing after him.

Dazai wished he could just sprint down the hall and corner Ginny with his questions now.

Unfortunately, the youngest Weasley had something of a head-start on him, and was already well out of sight by the time Dazai finally made it back into the school's main building. He only faintly recognized the hall he was in now. But he certainly wasn't confident enough in his navigation skills to figure out what route Ginny must have taken. Which left only one option.

Closing his eyes, Dazai let his Magical Sensitivity sense spread throughout the school as he walked.

Magic stung his skin.

The magic was all around him—centered over a charmed painting, a spinning staircase, a self-lighting candle. His face scrunched up in discomfort and the beginnings of a headache made itself painfully known.

Damn. Dazai wasn't practiced enough with this new-found skill to track any magic less than overwhelming. If only he could track Ginny's magic... her wand, a potion, something. But her magical signature was too faint to follow compared to everything else around.

Before he could blindly run into a wall, Dazai at last came to a stop. He opened his eyes with a tired sigh.

No Ginny.

Dazai clicked his tongue. He'd run off hoping to make some actual progress on his assignment, only to wind up getting himself lost. It was annoying. The only way Dazai could conceive of fixing the situation was to wait around for the magical creature living in the walls —the basilisk—to pop up. He'd be able to track it just like he had last time. Only, then he ran the risk of missing Ginny altogether, showing up on the scene of the crime first, and making himself look even guiltier than before.

Bringing a hand to scratch idly at his wrist, Dazai settled against the wall.

Waiting for the basilisk it was.

Once more, Dazai let his eyes slip shut. The magic around him immediately came again into sharper focus. It wouldn't do to be caught unawares. The sooner he could sense the creature's movements, the better.

Dazai stood like that for only a minute before—

"There you are, friend."

A tiny jolt of magic appeared from down the hall—feeling like a calm storm. Dazai was overcome with the feeling that this magical signature was familiar, somehow. Something that was always just as the edge of his awareness.

Dazai opened his eyes and turned to face Blaise.

Immediately, the noxious magic swarming at his senses lessened to a dull buzz.

He pushed off the wall, hands falling flat at his sides. “Did the game already end?” Dazai hadn’t thought he’d been gone for that long. But, then again, he’d been so focused on trailing Ginny, it was possible more time had slipped by without his noticing.

When Blaise shook his head, however, Dazai only grew more confused.

Immediately following this confusion was thinly-veiled suspicion.

Blaise easily read the twisting expression on Dazai’s face. He let out a breath. There was a grim mien about him. “No. Hermione stayed behind to watch the rest of the game, though. She can tell you who won later.”

“That’s what you were going to do,” Dazai pointed out. “You didn’t have to follow me to the bathroom, Blaise.”

“You must have passed at least three restrooms on the way here, Dazai.” Blaise leveled him with a stare. “You snuck away to do something else,” he said, sounding certain.

“Did I really? *Ah*... I’m only a little lost again—”

“Dazai,” Blaise cut in, serious. “Please don’t lie to me.”

Dazai’s mouth snapped shut at once.

Distractedly, his eyes briefly flickered away to the other end of the hall—the one Ginny had maybe wandered down some minutes before. She certainly wasn’t there now. She could easily be at the other end of the school already. Dazai couldn’t sense the slithering creature he’d felt last time, either.

He looked back to Blaise only to find the other boy watching him with a thoughtful expression.

“I’m not lying,” Dazai lied.

Blaise didn’t comment, only glanced off to where Dazai’s eyes turned to seconds earlier. There was nothing to see. Even Dazai’s heightened Magical Sensitivity couldn’t find what it was looking for down there. After several moments, Blaise finally looked back to Dazai.

“You know I trust you.”

Dazai blinked. He didn’t like where this was going.

His eyes briefly flicked away again. This was kind of a bad time for a heart-to-heart with Blaise. Actually—*anytime* was a bad time for a heart-to-heart, as far as Dazai was concerned. But now especially.

But there was no stopping Blaise now. Blaise was always cool-as-could-be, uncaring for everything standing between him and what he wanted. Generally, Dazai considered it a good quality. Now he was a little less sure.

Dazai opened his mouth to speak, but Blaise didn't let him.

"I know you think feelings are gross. I'm going to say this anyway," he said. "It's for your own good." He paused. "And mine."

"I'm busy right now," was all Dazai could protest with. He looked to the end of the hall again.

Blaise ignored him.

"Before I met you..." Blaise paused. Maybe he was also finding the heavy tone of conversation to already be a bit much. After a second, however, he plowed on. Dazai cursed his luck silently. "I didn't care about anything. Even blood politics, despite being a pureblood Slytherin myself. It doesn't interest me at all."

"We can agree on that," Dazai commented, hoping to dispel the tension somewhat. A foreboding, sick feeling had begun to worm its way into Dazai's chest—one he had some time ago come to associate with warm-and-soft conversations. He squirmed, wanting to escape.

"But you're different. For the first time in my life, I thought I actually wanted to see what you would do next. To get to know you," Blaise said. "I've never felt so strongly about anything before, Dazai. So no matter who turns against you—no matter what you do, I want to be with you to see it through." Here, Blaise paused again. Only this time, he seemed to only be weighing the words to come next. "Don't think I didn't notice we never returned the Philosopher's Stone last year, Dazai. There's something bigger going on here. Bigger than Hogwarts and all of us."

Dazai heart caught in his throat.

Blaise was always the one seeing through him, wasn't he? Calling him on lies and reading into the almost-invisible expressions on his face. If anyone ever understood Dazai, Blaise had the greatest chance of it.

The Port Mafia's business was the Port Mafia's business alone. But of course—if anyone was going to sniff out their involvement, it would be Blaise. Because the Port Mafia was as much a part of Dazai as his bandages were.

Mori had said to keep the mafia a secret—

"I don't care."

Dazai startled out of his thoughts. The static ringing in his ears sounded faraway.

Blaise watched him for a moment, then, at once, deflated with a sigh. He looked exhausted, Dazai realized. Was it the stress of this emotional conversation? Or maybe all the pressure

from Dazai's growing list of enemies?

"I don't care about any of that. If it's what you want to do, then I want to do it with you," Blaise said, honest and slow. He purposefully met Dazai's wide eyes. "But I want it *with* you. Not stuck here in the dark for you to pick-and-choose when you think I'm trustworthy enough to bring into the fold. I'm more loyal to you than I've ever been loyal to anyone else before. I proved that last year. All I'm asking is for you to trust me in return. I don't care about anything else than that."

"Anything else..." Dazai echoed, stupefied despite himself. He blinked several times. Dazai would never say so aloud, but he was definitely taken aback by such an absolute loyalty and trust.

Blaise's lips twitched into a small smile. He must have read through Dazai's thoughts again. Like always.

...Blaise really did know him well, didn't he?

"...You're a strange guy, Blaise."

"Maybe," Blaise said, simply. "So are you."

"Ah. I guess that's right."

Dazai looked away briefly, but his senses were too shot from the heavy conversation to really feel around for magic, now. He sighed.

"You're more emotional than when we first met," he said, raising a brow and crossing his arms over his chest. "I really do bring out the worst in you."

Blaise chuckled. Dazai was a little surprised to see a hint of relief in Blaise's face now. "Feelings come with the territory, I think," he said, not looking at all abashed for the genuine smile on his lips. "Caring about someone isn't so bad."

Dazai bristled, defensive. "It's gross. And a weakness."

"That's just what I've been thinking, and I wanted to tell you," Blaise continued unperturbed. "Seeing as you're always in the middle of one scheme or another, now seemed like a fine time."

At the word 'scheme' Dazai glanced again to the empty hall around them. He almost let his eyes slip shut in focus but stopped at the last moment upon seeing Blaise still watching him.

"Will you tell me what you're up to?" Blaise asked. "No matter what it is, I want to help."

Dazai opened his mouth, then closed it.

After a second, he echoed in a voice so quiet as to almost be a whisper. "No matter what?"

Blaise didn't even blink. "Even if you were twice as bad as everyone is saying, I'd still be your friend."

"I can't tell you everything."

"Tell me what you can."

Silence sat between them. Blaise, smiling smally like it was the easiest thing in the world to be Dazai's friend. Dazai, staring back wide-eyed like he'd never felt anything before that moment.

A hand fell over Dazai's wrist.

Blaise pulled back the second Dazai stilled underneath him. At some point, Dazai had started picking at the skin there again. *Huh.*

"You and Draco have been sneaking around lately," Blaise said suddenly. It was a clear dismissal from their previous conversation. An invitation to move on without lingering on the heaviness for too long. Dazai took it as though a fish in a desert, finally spotting an oasis over the last bend of sand. "I take it this is related, somehow?"

Blaise gestured to the empty hall around them.

After a second of uncertainty, Dazai numbly nodded.

Blaise was different. Everything Mori had said about letting his friends weight him down... clearly Mori had never met someone like Blaise. Someone who trusted and cared so infrequently, but so wholly at the same time.

But then why did it feel like something was curling up and screaming in Dazai's chest to even just consider what Blaise was asking for?

"I followed Ginny Weasley here," he said. "I need to talk with her about... the petrification of Mrs. Norris."

Blaise's smile down-turned thoughtfully, but otherwise he didn't comment on Dazai's pause. "And she came here half-way through the game..." Blaise trailed off. "That is pretty suspicious."

Considering Dazai had done the same exact thing, he supposed that 'suspicious' applied at least double to him.

"I lost track of her here," Dazai clarified. "She could be anywhere by now."

Blaise hummed. "We're in a pretty central part of the school," he told Dazai. "You're right, she could be anywhere now. I'm guessing it's time sensitive." When Dazai nodded, he tilted his head. "We'd have a better chance of finding her if we split up."

They would, certainly. But—

“No, no. Not this time.”

As it was, Dazai was still barely sure he knew what Ginny was up to. And on the off-chance she really *was* sneaking off to petrify someone else, Blaise would just be making himself a prime victim. Dazai had No Longer Human on his side. Blaise only had an ambivalent attitude.

“That would only make things worse,” Dazai continued, vague. “I’d rather you be at my side.”

Blaise blinked, surprise across his face. Almost immediately, however, it was warmed over by a genuine smile.

Dazai flushed. “Or sat back at the quidditch field like I’d originally told you to! But since you’ve already invited yourself along, I need to keep an eye on you.”

Blaise gave Dazai a knowing look that Dazai at once prickled at.

“You’re an awful Second,” he grumbled.

“Sure,” Blaise said. “So what’s the plan, Boss?”

Dazai watched him for a second before sighing heavily. He was *planning* on waiting for the basilisk to show itself. But having Blaise here... (An image flashed in Dazai’s mind—Blaise taking Quirrell’s spell meant for him, falling to the floor in a heap, *bleeding—).*

Really, having friends was so... *so...*

Complicated.

Somehow, Dazai didn’t think Father had the same internal conflicts Dazai had when considering his subordinates. Father had his men killed seemingly on impulse. But for Dazai, just the thought of pulling Blaise in too deep left him feeling wrong-footed.

Maybe Mori was right about him. About *sentimentality.*

Dazai buried the thought.

“Since I can’t find Ginny, we need to head back to the game. Preferably soon.”

“Not going to search for her?”

“Not implicating us in another attack,” Dazai corrected.

Blaise’s eyes widened, briefly, as he took in Dazai’s words. Then, his expression grew serious once more. “Let’s hurry, then,” he said. Without waiting for confirmation, Blaise reached out and gently took Dazai’s hand in his own. Dazai’s hand was plaint in his. Blaise lightly pulled Dazai back in the direction he’d come from. And—

Magic.

A staggering surge of magic suddenly slithered underneath the floor. It swerved beneath the tile, then vanished into the wall a second later.

Dazai gasped at the sudden swell of magic. He would have lost his footing if it weren't for Blaise's steadying hold.

The monster Dazai had felt right before Mrs. Norris was petrified... It was just here! Which could only mean—!

"Dazai?" Blaise asked, voice palpably worried. He pulled a hunched-over Dazai upright with their joined hands. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"Too late," Dazai hissed under his breath.

"...what?"

A second later, a piercing scream split the air in two.

-

Severus was not the first one on the scene.

Students were already gathered around the body—frozen stiff and petrified. It was a student this time. Not just a professor's beloved cat, but a *student* entrusted in Hogwarts' care. Severus recognized the immovable, horrified stare as that of first-year Gryffindor Collin Creevey.

Severus could see the headlines now.

Hogwarts was *fucked.*

Just like last time, too many observers had already gathered in a crowd to make any guesses as to the culprit. The scene's integrity was shot the very second the Quidditch game's final score rang out. The very second the hallways started to flood with students again, the culprit *(or culprits)* would have easily slipped away.

Severus opened his mouth to shout—tell the brats to either clear the scene or report anything strange they might have seen.

He stopped.

Froze in place as though he were just then petrified himself.

Because standing at the front of the crowd, not six feet from Mr. Creevey's body was Dazai Osamu and Blaise Zabini.

Something caught in Severus' throat. Dread pooled in his gut.

There was no bloody message on the wall this time and, similarly, nothing out of place on Dazai's person. But there was an almost wild look in the boy's eyes. Beside him, the usually unflappable Blaise seemed just as frantic.

"Professor Snape!"

"He—the Demon did it again!"

"Oh Merlin, is that Collin?!"

"Professor!"

Severus bit his tongue with enough force that, a second later, he tasted iron.

"Silence!" He snapped.

The hall immediately went quiet.

Severus kept his gaze on Dazai and Blaise, even as whispered chattering still sounded around him. He looked over their faces, their hands, their clothes—searching for some indication of what had transpired here. They both looked distinctly caught-off-guard, but Severus didn't think it was in a particularly guilty manner. Still...

Severus couldn't shake the facts gnawing at his stomach.

After all, this was the second petrification Dazai was at. The *second* time he'd been closest to the body and surrounded by accusations. Not only that, but Dazai and Blaise both had slipped away only half-way through the match. Leaving without a word was suspicious enough, but for Dazai to stir up trouble then vanish at once was malicious at best. That, and the Demon Student rumors. While he couldn't have cast a petrification spell himself, that didn't mean there weren't other options...

But that couldn't be... could it?

Severus' eyes flicked to Blaise thoughtfully, before disregarding that thought in favor of the more realistic one: the events of fifty-years prior were coming to pass again.

"Students! Clear out!"

Severus barely kept himself from jumping at Septima Vector's sudden entrance. The students didn't fare nearly as well, stumbling over one another to hastily get out of her way. While some of the kids hurried to leave, many lingered behind. Dazai and Blaise also stayed rooted in place, evidently deciding that they were either exempt, or soon to be interrogated.

Septima came up on Severus' left side. She didn't admonish the remaining students, merely looking over the scene with a grim expression. "No evidence again?" She asked quietly.

Severus shook his head, equally somber.

She huffed. “You two!”

Dazai and Blaise startled to attention. Severus noticed how Dazai’s shoulders squared off and his entire body seemed to be turning as stiff as a cemetary stone. A blank mask suddenly came over the boy’s face. Severus’ eyes narrowed.

“Professor Vector,” Dazai said, voice just shy of pleasant. It had a hollow quality to it. “Should I even bother trying to explain myself? Or am I all out of chances?” His eyes flicked to Severus then back.

Septima’s brows furrowed for just a second, but she shook the emotion off just as fast. “I’m not sure it will do you much good.”

Dazai hummed as if expecting that much.

Severus ignored it. He knew the situation was pretty clear cut—the Daily Prophet’s favorite villain caught at the scene of the crime not once, but twice. It was damning, even Severus could admit that. Still. He had to ask. Had to at least try and defend Dazai.

He *knew* Dazai.

“Tell me what happened.”

Dazai blinked slowly his way. Then, “I got lost trying to find the bathroom. Blaise came to find me, but we found this instead.” He paused, voice still painfully dull. Distancing. “I’m afraid that’s the only defense I have.”

Snape wanted to believe it. He did.

“And you, Mr. Zabini?” Severus asked. He took a step forward, between his Slytherins and the watching crowd. “Does this align with your turn of events?”

Blaise nodded. “That’s what happened, Sir. I’m sure an investigation into the matter with find us innocent.”

Almost absurdly, Severus suddenly noticed that Dazai and Blaise were holding hands. It was such an oddly domestic detail to notice that he at once found himself unsure of how to proceed.

In the end, however, Severus didn’t have to.

Because at that very moment, the commanding presence of Minerva McGonagall swept into the room like a storm. Students parted around her. Even Septima took a step back to make room. Minerva wore an expression of such fury on her face, Severus was sure someone (Blaise. Dazai.) was about to find themselves in a world of pain.

One of her lions was hurt.

Severus knew, had the situation been reversed, he would hold the same level of righteous fury. He *had.* Just last year.

“An investigation is already underway,” Minerva answered Blaise, but she spoke loud enough that the words carried to the entire mass of students. “I won’t stand for my students being hurt. Or petrified.”

Here she turned her sharp gaze from Dazai onto the other children. “Or slandered.”

Dazai and Blaise shared a glance. Opposite them, Severus and Septima did the same. Because, *huh?*

The entire body of students held their breath, for once not even daring to interject. Minerva on a mission was a force to be reckon with—perhaps even moreso than Poppy could be.

“Rest assured that Hogwarts will not stop until the culprit of this heinous crime is caught. But also know that blind speculation as to the culprit will not be tolerated.”

Students shifted on their feet. Someone cleared their throat.

Then, one quiet voice amongst them said, “Ma’am. Th-the culprit is right there.”

Spurred on, another added, “It’s Dazai! And his friend.”

“He’s a demon!”

“Just like with Mrs. Norris!”

“Dumbledore should have expelled him months ago!”

“He—”

“Enough!” Minerva snapped.

The sudden, frightened silence was deafening.

Minerva drew in a long breath, then released it slowly. Only once the crowd had gone entirely still did she speak again.

Every one of her following words had Severus’ eyes widening. Around him, the whole student body seemed to react exactly the same.

“Dazai Osamu and Blaise Zabini are innocent of this crime—of this, I am certain.” Minerva declared. She leveled the crowd with a calculating stare, then uttered four words that flipped the entire investigation on its head:

“There was a witness.”

Chapter End Notes

thanks so much for reading, i only hope at least one person can enjoy this fic as much as i did writing it
happy birthday all :)

next up: dazai tells blaise the truth. or. at least most of it. (this is dazai we're talking about. let's not get ahead of ourselves here lol)

The Truth

Chapter Summary

Dazai, Blaise, and Draco investigate the petrifications together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Let me get this straight," Blaise said slowly. "You're a member of a foreign mafia, sent to Hogwarts for a reason even you don't exactly know. Last year your boss had you steal the Philosopher's Stone. And this year he wants you to investigate and, presumably, stop a string of basilisk attacks. Which—for some reason—Draco's dad is responsible for. Is that all?"

Dazai knotted the ribbon into a bow under his collar before turning around to meet Blaise's eyes. Both Blaise and Draco had arrived in the office early in the morning for this exact conversation—early enough that Dazai was still preparing for the day. Having finished with the bow, he stalked over to the desk to grab his cloak where it was draped over the chair back.

"That's about all, yeah," Dazai hummed. He brushed the bangs from his eyes. "If I can solve Lucius' stupid test, then he'll agree to work with the Port Mafia peacefully. Now that we have you helping out, maybe we can finish up early and Mori will finally get off my back about it."

Blaise was seated on the couch—formerly Dazai's bed about half-an-hour ago. He wore a look of deep contemplation on his face and took turns glancing between Dazai and Draco. He was probably recontextualizing everything he knew about them. Dazai wouldn't be surprised. This *was* kind of a bombshell.

Even then, Dazai was being kind of light on the details. Case in point: the words "special ability" had never once left his mouth. Some secrets were beyond his to share.

Draco, meanwhile, was leaned against the desk beside a sleeping Egg. Guilt was written plainly across his face.

Dazai elbowed him. "Lighten up, Draco. No one holds you accountable for Lucius' weird plan."

When Draco shot him a wordless glare, Dazai merely shrugged into the sleeves of his cloak.

"Wait."

Dazai paused half-way into his other sleeve. It slid down his arm and hung there instead. "What?"

Blaise stood up with a frown. “I thought Mori was your father. Is he actually your boss?”

Draco blinked. His eyes suddenly widened as if with realization, and he whirled to face Dazai as well.

“He’s my boss,” Dazai said, then winced internally.

Technically, Mori was no more his boss than he was anybody else’s. Mori was just the boss’ doctor. But for all Dazai’s *real* dad was the actual boss, the man didn’t actually do much leading these days. But short of explaining Father’s declining mental state, this interpretation would have to do. Dazai wasn’t about to announce the Port Mafia was in the middle of a power struggle in front of Lucius’ son.

“But he also takes care of me,” Dazai continued before Blaise and Draco’s mounting worry could voice itself. He fixed Blaise with a pointed stare. “Is that really what you’re focusing on, Blaise? Not the implication that a higher power is actively worming its way into magical society?”

Blaise looked nonplussed. “I definitely wasn’t expecting that.” He shrugged. “But it’s like I said: I don’t really care if what you do is good or bad. I just want to be there. Whatever you decide.”

Dazai felt his cheeks flush over and looked away with a click of his tongue. Genuine people were the *worst.* Unfortunately, that only had him facing Draco.

Draco raised a knowing and amused brow.

“Anyway,” Blaise continued. Evidently, he was choosing to take pity on Dazai today. It was a far cry from his confession during the Quidditch game. “How did you even enroll at Hogwarts with all of this going on in your background? I can’t imagine the headmaster doesn’t realize the whole situation is... odd.”

Dazai shrugged. He finally shuffled his cloak back into place and deftly buttoned it straight. “Not sure. Mori took care of the paperwork.”

Across the room, Blaise made an odd face. Dazai eyed him, but didn’t comment.

“And outside of Yokohama, the Port Mafia doesn’t even exist in rumors. For all intents and purposes, Mori is just your average doctor. I doubt Dumbledore has even cottoned-on to the Port Mafia’s presence.” He snorted. “Probably still trying to figure out what happened to his stupid guards last year.”

Draco clapped Blaise over the back. “I know it’s a lot,” he said, almost apologetic. “But those of high-class constantly have to deal with complicated schemes like this. You’ve never had much interest in politics, so I’ll help you figure it out.”

Dazai rolled his eyes.

“Great. Well, you two talk it out. I have bigger things to deal with right now. You’re welcome to help.”

Blaise and Draco both perked up.

“The witness,” Draco said.

“Ginny,” Blaise said.

Dazai nodded. “Both, actually. But the Ginny lead is a little more imperative, so we’ll start with that one.”

Draco straightened with a frown. He moved so fast that Egg jolted awake beside him.

The dragon glared at him before flying to the couch and promptly falling back asleep there. Egg was awfully prone to sleeping for hours at a time... Dazai wondered if they weren’t giving her enough food or space to grow properly. She seemed more lethargic than a young dragon ought to be. Dazai shook away the thought—a problem for another time, maybe. Unless keeping her under-stimulated was the only thing also keeping her from going completely feral...

Again, something for later.

“Ginny?” Draco echoed. He was looking between Blaise and Draco in obvious question. “As in the youngest Weasley? What does she have to do with anything?”

Blaise shot Dazai a blank look. “Dazai,” he chided.

“Did I not tell you about that?” Dazai twirled his ribbon innocently. No one was fooled in the slightest. “Evidence points to Ginny as the culprit of both petrifications. Or, at the very least, heavily involved somehow. I suppose Lockhart could be involved... but evidence says otherwise, so I’m letting him off the hook for now.” He lifted his chin. “I wanted to talk with Ginny the other day, but she slipped away before I got the chance.”

“Wha—? *Ginny Weasley?* But how?”

“Not sure yet.” Dazai hummed, internally recalling what Nott had told him in the library. He still wasn’t quite sure of how all the pieces fit together. “But Lucius *did* have a chance to talk with her. Back at Flourish and Blotts. Do you remember?”

Draco’s eyes narrowed in thought. “We did get separated for a few minutes back then...” He trailed off in thought before shaking his head suddenly in disapproval. “I can see the reasoning behind it... but that theory has its own flaws too. You don’t know my father like I do, Dazai. He wouldn’t hinge an entire plan on the shoulders of an eleven-year-old blood traitor. They’re *notoriously* unreliable.”

He paused. Realization flashed briefly across Draco’s expression, and a second later he amended, “at least, that’s what my father would think. Obviously not all blood traitors are like that. Otherwise I wouldn’t have joined Hell’s Hounds.”

Close enough, Dazai thought.

“I know Lucius’ type,” Dazai said. Certainly, people like Mori and Lucius carefully weighed the pros and cons of putting importance on eleven-year-olds. Dazai’s first year at Hogwarts was evidence enough of that. “And anyway, I don’t think your father’s plan is that one-sided. Though Ginny does seem to be at the crux of it, I’m led to think there is a lot more going on behind the scenes,” he said.

“It can’t hurt to talk with Ginny,” Blaise chimed in.

“Not irreparably, at least,” Dazai said.

A touch of frustration in Draco’s tone, he said, “If Father had only trusted me with his plan at the start of the year, we could have washed our hands of this by now.”

“Well, he doesn’t know what he’s missing,” Dazai consoled off-handedly.

Draco perked up, a startled but appreciative smile flicking across his face for only a second.

In all honesty, Dazai wasn’t particularly focused on the other snake at that exact moment. The platitude had slipped out mostly on an impulse to keep peace. Internally, however, he was already running through the next step of his plan.

Step one was catching Blaise and Draco up on his investigation. With everyone trustworthy on the same page, he wouldn’t have to deal with potential hang-ups later. Dazai didn’t want a repeat of the Quidditch game, where Blaise had barged in half-way through Dazai’s job. And while he liked the twins and everyone else...

Dazai glanced between Draco and Blaise. They were both watching him, waiting for what was to come next.

Well...

Check step one off the list.

Moving on.

Finding Ginny was step two, of course. Dazai was fairly sure she would be at the Gryffindor common rooms today. If not, he was prepared to hunt Luna down for a lead, seeing as the two seemed to be good friends. Besides that, with how much Luna could talk, something significant was bound to slip out at some point.

Next came the interrogation of Ginny Weasley. This step was only about fifty-percent pre-plannable. Dazai was too lacking in the big picture to entirely predict her movements, but he was confident he could get her to talk regardless. And if she posed a threat? It was a magical one. Dazai wasn’t exactly in danger on that front; which only left keeping an eye on his subordinates. Easy enough.

And finally step three: finish the job. Learn what he needed to learn, do what he needed to do, then await further instructions from Yokohama. Mori would know what to do with whatever conclusions Dazai ended up drawing from Ginny. Case closed. Test completed. Hogwarts saved. Lucius and Mori would shake hands and make money and *blah blah blah*—

Okay. Admittedly, this probably wasn't Dazai's best plan. But he'd also definitely had worse (a quick glance to the living, breathing dragon in the room was enough proof there).

It would work.

"I'm going to talk with Ginny today," Dazai decided aloud. He turned to Draco for only a second before looking to Blaise. "You're welcome to come along. I'll be checking the Gryffindor common rooms for her first."

Blaise hummed. "Sure. If they let us in."

"I can be very persuasive."

"Are you planning to *charm* them or *harm* them?"

Dazai shrugged, the amused glint in his eyes not giving up his answer. He and Blaise both turned to Draco.

As expected, Draco was watching their exchange with a notable pinch between his brows. The expression read clear enough: *I want to come with, but...*

Realizing everyone's eyes were on him, Draco blinked. Then, his lips pulled noticeably downward. "I won't be coming with, of course."

"Of course," Dazai repeated. Then, deciding it best to soothe over Draco's clearly torn feeling on the matter, said, "Professor McGonagall—her witness—may have cleared me of guilt, but I'm still in no way innocent. As far as the public is concerned, I may as well be guilty of everything. Lucius wouldn't want you around me."

Somehow, Draco's expression only twisted more.

Dazai understood the feeling well. Just because Mori said he *had* to do something, didn't mean he *wanted* to. Of course, invoking Mori's name—or Lucius', in this case—left little room but to comply. Draco must have known that.

"You can still come with, if that's what you want," Blaise said. He gave a not-at-all reassuring thumbs-up. "We'll be discreet."

"Disc—" Draco started to speak, but before the word even made it out of his mouth, a bubbling laugh had broken out instead. *"Discreet?* You and Dazai? Are you being serious?"

He corners of Blaise's lips pulled up into a small smile. "I suppose not."

"Not really possible," Dazai chimed in himself, thinking of the time Millicent and Tracey had thrown rocks at him. "I guess I could pretend to kidnap you again."

Blaise turned to him, bewildered.

"...no thanks."

Dazai shrugged.

Draco sighed, the discomfort mostly leaving his expression until only a tired sort of fondness remained. He looked between them. “No. Dazai’s right. Being cleared of the petrifications doesn’t clear Dazai of everything the Daily Prophet has said about him. Even then, most people here still think Dazai’s guilty, anyway.”

“They think I’m buying off the teachers,” Dazai stage-whispered to Blaise. At Blaise’s nonplussed expression, he said, “I wouldn’t put it past me.”

“I shouldn’t come with,” Draco finished.

Dazai nodded, satisfied with that line of reasoning. As it was, he’d already been prepared to go this one alone. Having Blaise tag along was an unexpected bonus. For all Dazai hated when Blaise got sentimental on him, he was glad to have the snake with him now. Second in commands were the *best.* Dazai wondered why everyone didn’t have one.

Blaise had an oddly thoughtful look on his face. “If that’s what you want to do.”

Draco hesitated for a moment, before nodding. “It is.” He paused. “But. When you finish talking with Ginny, come back here and let me know what happened. Knowing my father as I do, I’ll be able to make sense of anything you learn better than you lot.”

“Just admit you’re curious,” Dazai needled.

“Thank you for your help,” Blaise said.

Draco shot Dazai a pointed glare, before turning a much more accommodating smile onto Blaise. Dazai steadfastly ignored him.

“Glad that’s settled,” he said. He turned to Blaise. “On that note, let’s head out. The sooner we take care of this, the better.”

The sooner Mori and Lucius can get off my back.

But Blaise stopped him short.

“After breakfast.”

“I agree,” Draco said, smug.

Dazai blinked. “The petrifications are a little more important than your morning toast.”

Blaise only shrugged.

“Unless Ginny is also planning to skip breakfast, I doubt she’ll be in her common room right now,” Draco intoned.

“Then we’ll sneak in now and ambush her when she gets back—!”

“Absolutely not.”

“No. Eat breakfast, Dazai.”

-

“Mr. Dazai a curious case,” Poppy said. She was bent over her notes—a stack of papers that had become very familiar to Severus since the year began. “Speaking of, St. Mungo’s is only more interested now than they were before I stopped sending them letters.”

“Fantastic.”

Poppy tapped her quill against a page, indicating a particular train of thought she’d had during Dazai’s last remedial class. “Honestly, I’m mostly surprised at his progress. He’s come a long way from last year. And he’s done it *fast*. Just yesterday, he managed to cast the levitation spell *seven* times before starting to feel unwell.”

Severus hummed. “There’s no precedence for how exceptional or ordinary his progress may be.”

“I suppose not.” Her eyes trailed down the page. Something was circled there. Poppy hovered over it for a second before saying, “I’d have him keep practicing *Wingardium Leviosa* for another class or so before moving on to the rest of the first-year curriculum. Keep to the less magically-demanding ones for now. But if he keeps at this pace, you can probably move him onto second-year spells by sometime next semester.”

“Already?” Severus asked, surprise flashing through him. Did Poppy really think Dazai was progressing *that* fast in his lessons—was ready to move on to the spells his peers were working with? Though, Snape had to concede that Dazai was surprisingly good at spellcasting when he could manage it without being sick. His wand hold was precise, his casting clear. Even Severus couldn’t deny that the boy was somewhat impressive.

“It helps that he already has the basics down.”

Severus nodded, conceding that.

“Now,” Poppy said, slowly. “There is one more thing.”

Oh. Severus did not like that tone. “What.”

She leaned away from her notes to level Severus with an amused smile. “It’s nothing bad, Severus. Enough fretting... Well, probably.”

“Probably,” Severus grit his teeth. “My favorite word.”

Poppy at least looked apologetic. She absentmindedly tapped her quill against whatever had been circled in the notes. “It’s more interesting, really. I’ve noticed when Mr. Dazai talks

about spells, he tends to describe how they feel in a lot more depth than I would have thought possible."

Severus sat up. Upon seeing his interest, Poppy continued.

"At the start of the year, do you remember? He described the *Aqua Eructo* spell as being cold. And you mentioned to me earlier that he's slipped up before—started describing a spell by how it feels before thinking to describe how the casting process actually works."

Severus' eyes narrowed in thought.

Yes—Dazai did have a tendency to describe magic in a way that didn't quite make sense. Severus had mostly written it off, too occupied with all of Dazai's other intricacies. Still...

"The sensation of magic—no matter the spell—is one of slight buzzing. It's a vibration on the skin, through the wand. Every account of it to date confirms this."

Poppy tutted. "His sensitivity is far beyond what I would have thought possible just a few months ago. Maybe he's perceiving magical qualities more than we are."

"That's—"

"Don't say impossible, Sev. You know Mr. Dazai is already leagues past what we thought was possible."

Severus' mouth snapped shut with a click. There was nothing to counter with. Poppy was right. But if the matron saw fit to mention it, Severus had to ask, "Is this something I need to work around in our lessons? Or work to correct?"

Poppy paused, eyes flicking to the far wall where the Sensing Stone was safely tucked away. She tapped her quill twice more, then set it down over the paper. "Hard to say. But as far as I can tell, he's using his sensitivity to deconstruct each spell he casts. Even just in theory, it's incredible to consider. Making sure he has an example to work off will probably help him to learn in the future."

"He learned *Motus Subtilis* without a guide," Severus tried to reason. Because Poppy's observations, for all they must have been the truth, were frankly absurd. He'd never heard of anyone conceptualizing magic like that—save, perhaps, in some particularly high-level book of magical theory. But never would he think to hear of it from a twelve-year-old with no practice in the arts.

Poppy nodded to indicate at her notes. "He described it as being a weaker version of *Wingardium Leviosa.* I think, lacking an actual example, he found the next best thing then broke it down to its bare essentials. Whatever conclusion he came to, it worked."

Severus' mouth dropped open despite himself.

"If that really is the case..." he trailed off gravely.

Poppy nodded.

Amazing. That's nothing short of amazing.

Severus shook himself. It was just a theory right now. And even if Poppy's theory was true, Dazai's sensitivity was *concerning* before it was *amazing*. Anything that left Dazai at risk of passing out should be treated with caution before awe.

If this is true, it's nothing short of incredible. And yet Dazai was failing all of his classes. Severus had to wonder... if Dazai just set his mind to it, what more could that boy achieve?

"Proceed as usual for now," Poppy said. "If you're feeling curious, you can ask him what exactly the magic feels like for him. But otherwise? Based on my observations these last few weeks, I'd say Mr. Dazai has gotten a pretty good grasp on how to work around his sensitivity."

Severus nodded as he took that in.

He would never say it, but he was feeling almost proud of Dazai.

The brat was a slacker with questionable character, but he really did seem to be working hard at learning magic. Maybe he should reward Dazai, somehow...

Knock, knock, knock.

Poppy and Severus both snapped up straight and turned towards the infirmary office door. They met eyes across the desk. Wordlessly, Poppy grabbed her notes from off the desk and slid them into a drawer. Only once they were put away did she call out.

"It's open!"

Minerva opened the door, then shut it at her back. Her eyes landed on Severus with a satisfied twitch. "I thought I'd find you both here."

Severus bristled automatically.

Poppy smiled in greeting. "Minerva. Is everything okay?"

Minerva took the seat beside Severus with a sigh. Though she leaned into it tiredly, there was a sure stiffness to her shoulders. Severus felt himself tense up on instinct. Nothing good ever came from a stressed out Minerva McGonagall.

They both watched her, curious but patient.

"Obviously not," she said after nearly a half-a-minute. Then she sighed. "How fares Mr. Creevey?"

Poppy shook her head, grim. "Petrified just like Mrs. Norris—he's alive, but unable to move. Unfortunately, the cure will take time to brew. I'm hoping to have it finished soon, but... I'm sorry, Minerva."

She nodded, but the anger in her entire visage was unmistakable. Still—it was an anger held just short of exploding.

Severus was familiar with that sort of anger. Anger at a situation out of your control. Anger at a situation you *should* have control over, but don't.

As was often the case these days, Severus' mind immediately turned to Dazai at the thought.

Minerva let out a breath. Though her anger didn't disappear, it did melt away into something a little more palatable. "You're doing everything you can, Poppy. It was unavoidable, it seems... though that isn't what I came here to speak about."

Poppy blinked. Then, dread bled across her expression. "It isn't another student, is it?"

"No! Merlin's beard, *no."* Minerva was quick to soothe over the unintended effect of her words. Then she paused, seeming to take the moment to consider what to say next.

Severus waited for her to continue for all of the ten seconds it took for him to become fed up with waiting. "Well?"

Minerva leveled him with a quelling look that Severus largely ignored. Her arms tightened into balls over the lap of her robes.

"Mr. Dazai is of a great concern to you," she said with gravity. Like stating a certain, but unfortunate, fact.

Severus sat up straighter in his seat. He saw Poppy do the same. Minerva briefly looked between the two of them.

She nodded to herself. "I thought so."

"He's one of my snakes," Severus bristled automatically.

"He's more than that," Minerva said. She stared at him, dull. "Severus Snape doesn't just get attached to *any* his students, after all. And he certainly doesn't open investigations into all of them."

Severus opened a mouth to argue back something (a lie, no doubt; for everything Minerva was saying was, in fact, the undisputed truth).

Minerva beat him to it. "I've taken my report on Mr. Creevey's petrification to Albus. But seeing as this is the first time I've ever seen you care about something, I wanted to inform you as well. About what my witness saw."

Severus curled his lip. "Was it wise to have Percy Weasley tail him?" He asked. "You know the other Weasleys are Mr. Dazai's friends. He's not exactly an unbiased party."

Minerva shot him a look. "It was that, or any other number of students who would see nothing but guilt in Mr. Dazai's every move." She shook her head. "No one in this school is unbiased on the topic of the Demon Student, Severus."

“She’s right,” Poppy said, drawing their attention. “But never mind that now. Minerva,” she tilted her head. “What Mr. Weasley witnessed... Is Mr. Dazai in danger?”

Severus frowned, brain immediately trailing the same concerning thought. “I thought your witness cleared him?”

“He did—but not because he saw someone else perform the petrification,” Minerva said. “Perhaps ‘witness’ is less accurate than ‘alibi.’ At the time of the petrification, Dazai was elsewhere in the school.”

“Your prefect can confirm Dazai wasn’t at the site of the petrification, but can’t tell us who was,” Severus reiterated slowly. Well, there went their lead suspect. Though Severus couldn’t help but feel slightly relieved, regardless. And guilty—even if for just a second, he *had* considered the strong possibility of Dazai truly being culpable. But Minerva’s testimony only opened more questions. “Who else wasn’t at the game?” He asked.

Minerva’s expression was severe. “I have a few leads. But unfortunately, quite a few students weren’t in attendance. And besides that, our eyes have only ever been on Mr. Dazai. If anyone else was acting suspicion, we hardly would have noticed...” she trailed off. Her eyes flicked between them again, clearly debating how much to say. But after a second, she relented. “You—the both of you—seem to care a great deal about Mr. Dazai. It is only because of this that I’m going to tell you what Mr. Weasley overheard.”

Severus felt the gravity of the situation suddenly, and he dug his heels into the floor. He had to ask—Minerva’s wording too suspiciously calculated not to. “Has Albus greenlit you sharing this Information?”

Minerva made a face. “He didn’t explicitly say one way or another.”

“But it was implied.”

“What did Mr. Weasley hear, Minerva?” Poppy asked. “I’m afraid if it’s about Mr. Dazai’s... well, his self-harming habits. We already know.”

Shock bloomed across Minerva’s entire visage, her mouth dropping open and her hands splaying open on her lap. “I—” she gawped. Then, with some concern retaining on her face, seemed to forcibly recover herself. “No. I hadn’t known about that. Is he..?”

“Oh... He’s been doing better, we think.”

Minerva’s frown was unshaken. Her brows were now pinched together worriedly.

“What did you learn, Minerva?” Severus asked. While he *would* appreciate Minerva’s insight on the situation, he wanted to hear this more.

Beyond that, of course, Severus had to acknowledge that Dazai probably didn’t want this particular tidbit of information getting out. And while Minerva was trustworthy to *him*, she certainly didn’t have *Dazai’s* trust.

Minerva took a breath, then stared directly into Severus’ eyes.

“Mr. Dazai is not responsible for the petrifications,” she said, “but I believe he knows who is.”

It was Severus’ turn to grape.

Poppy gasped.

Minerva looked between them for a second before making a thoughtful sound. “You didn’t know.”

Severus glared. “Of course we didn’t know!”

But Minerva didn’t look fazed. She leaned back in her chair. “Along with this newfound compassion of yours, Severus, seems to be an unwillingness to share with the class,” she pointed out with a pointed raise of her brow. At Severus’ unsmiling face, she elaborated. “For instance, when Albus turned the investigation over to me, you were less than clear on the details of what you’d already uncovered. Merely telling me investigating Yokohama was a dead end... that was a lie.”

“It is a dead end.”

“You neglected to explain their methods of deterrence are openly threatening.”

Stop sending letters or else.

Yes. Severus was familiar. Vague as they could be, Yokohama correspondences always indicated that further inquiry would be punished. Severus was yet to figure out how. The lack of clarity was almost worse, somehow.

Worse still was their lack of reception to Severus’ suspicion of abuse. Though, seeing as Severus was getting that on both the Yokohama *and* Albus front, this was more frustrating than it was worrying.

“You reached out to Yokohama,” Severus said after a moment had passed.

Minerva scowled. “Yes. Only to be told none-too-politely that further questioning would not be tolerated. This lack of tolerance was followed up by a particularly unsubtle threat.”

Severus pinched his nose. He had warned her not to investigate Yokohama. “Direct but vague. I’m familiar.”

“So you *do* know about how incredibly suspicious Yokohama is,” Minerva accused. “Severus, I’ve dealt with dozens of foreign countries in the past for students who have moved around a lot. That includes Japan. With Hogwarts’ connections, the most backlash I’ve ever received has been a mildly complicated cultural barrier.”

Severus nodded. He knew where this was going. And, with a sinking feeling in his chest, he glanced to Poppy. Her expression was looked as baleful as he felt.

Because this was one particular thought they had shared, then dropped just as quickly.

Something both entirely out of the realm of possibility and *not* at the same time.

“Mr. Dazai is the only student in Hogwarts’ history to not currently be residing in our recruitment zone,” Minerva continued, pointedly listing off her evidences, “and he is from a city that threatens punishment for any kind of contact.” She narrowed a glare at them both. “And for some reason, you haven’t fully included Albus in on your findings. What exactly is going on here?”

Severus drew in a breath.

Poppy shifted in her seat a little guiltily.

When neither of them spoke for too-long a moment, Minerva sighed. She dragged a tired hand across her face, expression at once weary and... fond?

“Look,” she said, “It’s as I’ve said: clearly, Mr. Dazai is someone you care for greatly. And because I know you would never disobey the headmaster, I have to assume there’s a good reason as to why you are playing your theories close to your chest. Tell me what’s really going on, and I’ll tell you what my prefect overheard.”

Severus blinked. He knew Minerva well, but despite himself, he was still a little surprised at her technique. “Bartering information... how Slytherin of you.”

Minerva looked nonplussed. “You clearly care about the boy, Severus—never thought I’d see the day. But... I am starting to see why. For all the media has to say about him, Mr. Dazai is a... concerning child.”

Severus and Poppy leaned forward, at attention.

“What information have you been keeping from Albus? What theories?”

Severus shared a look with the matron, silently asking her opinion on the matter. She looked contemplative for all of a second before taking the lead.

“It’s not that we’ve been hiding things from Albus...” she said carefully.

Severus bit his tongue. While *Poppy* wasn’t explicitly hiding things from Albus, *he* was. Because even just in theory, the implications of Yokohama’s secrecy could mean...

Severus forced away the thought, a conversation with Albus one-year prior ringing exhaustively in his ears.

Special Ability Users. A group of powered individuals that kept themselves secret the way wizards did.

The way *Yokohama* did.

It was a crack theory. And yet...

“Any request to Yokohama yields no result—except for warnings to back off,” Poppy was telling Minerva. “We aren’t quite sure what that could mean, but we’ve theorized...” she sent a glance to Severus, then back, “perhaps Yokohama may be involved in some large-scale conspiracy. Of a kind.”

“Their responses are too similar to the Ministry’s to overlook,” Severus said.

Minerva blinked. Again, shock split across her face. “You can’t seriously think that.”

“It’s like you said: no other city in the world has responded to an inquiry this way. The only group I’ve ever seen draft letters like this is the Ministry of Magic itself when responding to curious muggles.”

Minerva frowned. She hovered a hand over her mouth, looking deep in thought.

“Moving on,” Poppy continued, “in terms of his health, we’ve narrowed down the cause of Mr. Dazai’s illness to an incredibly high Magical Sensitivity. He saw white in the Sensing Stone.”

“White?” Minerva’s mouth dropped open, her hand falling with it. “He was messing with you.”

“He was serious,” Severus said. “Unfortunately.”

“It’s true. Mr. Dazai didn’t seem to know what the Sensing Stone was until after he told his color. He couldn’t have known. He’s able to sense magic even if it's incredibly slight or from a distance. Actually, Severus and I were just discussing this.”

Minerva hummed, surprise mingling with thoughtfulness on her face. “...I see.”

Severus met her eyes. “That means something to you,” he observed.

She spared him a considering look. “According to Mr. Weasley, just seconds before the petrification happened, Mr. Dazai... reacted. To something.”

Severus gawped. Poppy did the same.

“He’s able to sense the petrifications as they happen,” she said, awed.

Severus swallowed hard.

“What else did your prefect hear?”

Minerva sat forward and twined her fingers together over her lap. “Your secret Dazai Investigation Club,” she said instead, “let me in on it. Don’t forget, Albus put *me* in charge of his case. I’ll admit, the boy is, perhaps, worthy of your concern. If you think Mr. Dazai needs help, I want to be able to give it. But if he is in any way a threat, I *need* to know.”

“It’s more of a Dazai Protection Club,” Poppy countered, a tinge of humor in her tone. Severus would’ve rolled his eyes, if not for how intensely he was waiting for Minerva’s next

words.

“Regardless. Involve me in your side of the investigation, and I’ll let you in on mine. You two can make sure Mr. Dazai is well—or whatever it is you want from him. And I can clear him of any guilt in Albus’ eyes. Given that, I suppose Albus can remain none-the-wiser to whatever theories you are... less forthcoming with. For whatever reason.” Here, she sent Severus a quick glance. Something considering shone in her eyes for a second, replaced almost immediately thereafter with only an asking stare.

Severus met her gaze head-on.

Asking without asking. Minerva was prepared to let him keep some secrets.

Severus wondered... perhaps Albus’ treatment of the Quirrell story (and the petrification one, now) wasn’t *only* bothering him and Poppy. The blatant disregard for student safety wasn’t something Minerva would overlook after all.

Or maybe Severus’ concern for Dazai was just so shocking she had to see it for herself.

“You first,” Severus said. “You said Mr. Dazai knows who the culprit is?”

Minerva’s lips quirked, briefly, into a self-satisfied smile. Then she was right back to business. She frowned, severe. “Apparently, he’s been investigating for some time now. And he’s been doing a better job of it than we are.”

“Problem child...” Severus cursed under his breath.

If anyone could lie to his face and get away with it, it would be Dazai. He’d done so last year, after all. Severus should have known.

Not investigating the petrifications my ass!

Minerva cleared her throat, then dived into the story of what her prefect had overheard.

His eyes skipped away to the far wall as Minerva described an emotionally charged discussion overheard between Blaise and Dazai. All the while she talked, Severus couldn’t help but to envision the half-burnt letter still hiding away in his desk.

Blaise and Dazai had argued about *trust* and *friendship*, then Dazai had sensed Creevey's petrification and they'd both wandered off to investigate.

Maybe...

Minerva’s brows were pinched together as she spoke, explaining that Dazai’s secret-keeping seemed to extend even between the two close friends. How Dazai hadn’t been able to keep up his walls for long, when Blaise was so straightforward about his earnest care.

Maybe... he thought of the letter. Of what it might mean. Of a concerned friend unapologetically pushing past every barrier in his way because Dazai could too easily dance around anything any subtler. *Maybe a more direct technique would yield better results.*

A plan bubbled slowly to life in Severus' mind.

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The entrance to the Gryffindor common rooms was just as Dazai remembered from last year.

Staring down at them, the painted lady looked about ready to scream. Her arms were crossed and her expression was that of a pig's.

"It's as I've said," she spat, "no Slytherins allowed. Not one without a password, and certainly not one who goes around petrifying his enemies! I won't let you harm these students!"

Dazai rolled his eyes. A step behind him, Blaise nudged him reassuringly.

Dazai propped his hands on his hips and leveled the lady with a stare. "We went through this whole song-and-dance last year, didn't we? Just call out a Weasley for me."

She puffed. "Well, the circumstances are different now, aren't they?"

Dazai clicked his tongue. He could just as easily remove a glove, break her enchantment, then pry the door open with his bare hands. He wasn't even really trying to keep a low profile anymore. Sure, it would turn a few heads, but...

Dazai shook away the indulgent thought. There was a difference between causing some extra trouble and revealing No Longer Human. And Dazai wasn't desperate enough yet to take things that far.

"Fine," he said. The painted lady startled at Dazai's sudden indifference. "I'll just ask the twins what the password is during lunch."

She sputtered.

"Hey—no! No, you can't just do that! I really won't let you in!"

"Even then?" Dazai tilted his head, hands slumping uselessly at his sides. "You're so serious."

"Do we have a back-up plan?" Blaise asked. He was peeking around Dazai's shoulders to stare at the painted lady with a frown. "I don't think she's going to budge."

"Don't go calling this a failure yet," Dazai said. "Obviously, we're going to just wait here until someone comes out then force our way in."

Blaise made a face like he was clearly unsatisfied with the crude plan.

Dazai shrugged. "No need to complicate something simple... hey, did you bring your knife by chance?"

Blaise hummed in assent, then abruptly realized why Dazai had asked and said, “absolutely not, Dazai.”

“You’re no fun.” Dazai tutted. “What happened to *‘I don’t care what you do as long as I’m there’* Blaise?”

“I’m not stabbing someone.” He paused, then amended, “I’m not stabbing a random person when there are still reasonable alternatives.”

“Uh—what?”

Dazai and Blaise both startled at the new voice suddenly entering their conversation. Both whirled in place to see who was approaching down the hall.

The Gryffindor prefect Percy faltered upon seeing both their eyes suddenly turned on him. He paused for several seconds before recollecting himself, straightening upright, and walking towards Blaise and Dazai.

“This is an... interesting duo,” Percy said tightly as he came to a stop in front of them. He looked a bit like he’d just swallowed a lemon. “Should I be concerned?”

“Not really,” Dazai said. He rolled on the balls of his feet, smiling cheerfully. Was it good or bad luck to run into the senior Weasley? Weasleys generally had a good opinion of him, but this one was a prefect... In response to his friendly demeanor, Percy looked mildly discomforted. Dazai huffed in frustration before falling back on his heels. “Just banter between friends. You know how it is.”

“...I suppose.” Percy cleared his throat. “But I meant that you two make an interesting group to be waiting at the Gryffindor door.”

“Again, not really. We had a party in here last year.”

They stared in silence at one another for a moment.

It was the painted lady who broke it. *“Ahem—”* she cleared her throat, “These two devilish snakes have been trying to force their way in for several minutes now! Be a dear and chase them off, Mr. Weasley.”

“If I was forcing my way in, you would know it,” Dazai said, wiggling a gloved finger in her direction. Her mouth snapped shut.

Percy looked between them, no small amount of confusion in his expression. But he corrected himself quickly. The expression Percy was wearing now wasn’t exactly amenable, but it didn’t look nearly as uncomfortable as it had moments before. “You need into the Gryffindor common rooms... why?”

“Visiting a friend,” Dazai responded simply.

Percy’s eyes floated between them. “I can call Fred, George, and Ron out for you. But I’m afraid, given recent events, it wouldn’t be responsible to permit you both inside.”

“With all due respect,” Blaise cut in. He didn’t sound in the slightest respectful when he spoke, much to Dazai’s amusement and Percy’s disbelief. “By not allowing us to go inside, you’re perpetuating a harmful rumor about my friend. That’s hardly responsible, either.”

Percy gawped.

Dazai grinned ear-to-ear. “Come on, Perc. We already argued about this last year. Can’t we just skip to the part where you let us in?”

Percy blinked rapidly. “I recall you shoving your way in last time.”

“Dazai, no,” Blaise scolded quietly.

“Yeah,” Dazai said, “let’s do that again!”

Percy stared, wide-eyed at the turn their conversation had suddenly taken. “I’m not letting you in,” he said, firmly putting his foot down on their Slytherin antics. “I will tell your friends you’re looking for them, and that’s all.”

Dazai blew a raspberry. *“Boo!* You’re less fun than last time.”

Percy pointedly met his eyes. “Do not follow me,” he said. Only when Dazai took an obliging step back did Percy finally walk past them to the painted lady. He dipped his head and whispered the password to her. Dazai couldn’t make out what he muttered, tragically. A second later, the secret doorway swung open. Percy stepped one foot inside.

“It’s only,” Dazai said suddenly. Percy stopped in his tracks. He stiffened, half-in-half-out of the common rooms, and turned to face them once more. “We’re actually here to see your sister, not anyone else.”

Percy’s shoulders stiffened. His hand on the door tensed, then he nervously flexed the rigor out of them.

Dazai eyed the reaction with narrowed eyes.

Percy paused, then slowly backed out of the door until it was only held open by the tips of his fingers. “...I wasn’t aware you were friends with Ginny,” he said haltingly.

“We met on the train,” Dazai helpfully explained.

Percy looked to Blaise.

“I saw her from a distance, once,” Blaise said.

With a twitching brow, Percy looked between the two of them. His gaze was sharp—searching. For what?

Dazai clocked the reaction with a frowning contemplation. Percy was thinking *something*... Dazai couldn’t parse out exactly what. An idea tickled at the edge of Dazai’s mind, but he pushed it away after a second. Instead, he smiled. “Don’t look so suspicious! I promise we’ll

behave. And anyway, Ginny is a friend of mine. You'd be cruel to control who she can and can't talk to, Percy."

Percy gaped, practically flinching away from the accusation. Although he recovered quickly enough, he still looked sick with something like guilt when he spoke. "Is Ginny expecting you?"

"Sure," Dazai rocked back on his heels. At Percy's burning stare, he added an off-hand, "Well, maybe not *expecting.* But she'll be glad to see us."

"We need to tell her something. We won't bother you again after."

Dazai blinked and whirled on Blaise. "We might pester him again, actually, if I want to—"

"It's time sensitive," Blaise continued, completely steamrolling Dazai's objections.

Percy, again, looked between them like he was seeing them for the first time and wasn't quite sure what to make of them. He levelled them with a pointed stare. "Your... reputation makes me cautious."

Dazai frowned. At his side, Blaise made a sound of general offense.

"But," Percy said, not a second later, "You're right. Ginny is her own person and you are innocent." He bit his lip, paused, then shook his head. "But you still can't come in the Gryffindor common room. I'll let her know you're waiting out here for her."

"Drat." Dazai snapped his fingers.

"Thank you, Percy."

"Ah... you're welcome." Percy nodded once, then re-opened the painting door and slipped inside.

It clicked shut behind him. Now, only the painted lady towered above Blaise and Dazai. She scowled.

"That went well," Dazai commented idly.

"All things considered," Blaise agreed. "I'm surprised he agreed so easily."

Dazai shrugged. "Maybe he also noticed Ginny has been acting strange lately... you think he wants us to talk some sense into her?"

"I wouldn't put much stock into that theory." Blaise turned the idea over in his head for a moment. "Anyway, Percy wouldn't exactly know what to look for."

No one else in their right mind would suspect a first-year Gryffindor as causing the petrifications.

Blaise certainly had a point there. Ginny wasn't exactly a prime suspect—not unless you knew about the Port Mafia's involvement. Without the extra info Dazai was working off of, Lucius' test would be akin to searching for a needle in a haystack. Still...

"He must've noticed something."

Blaise hummed, conceding the point.

"Huh..."

Blaise and Dazai turned to the painted lady, who was glaring down at them with suspicion.

"Did you need something?"

Her lips puckered with obvious affront. She didn't say anything except to burn a hole with her glare.

Dazai considered poking fun at her expression. In the end, however, she was spared the insult. The door swung open before Dazai could say anything about the red of her cheeks looking like a baboon's backside.

Percy and Ginny arrived at the doorway side-by-side. Percy's hand was rested on his sister's shoulder in silent protection, but he didn't exactly seem like he was going to attack. More like he was bracing against some internal struggle.

Meanwhile, Ginny's entire demeanor oozed discomfort. Not with Percy—no, she was practically leaning her whole weight into his side. But she did look very uneasy. Her brows were pinched and her eyes were looking to-and-fro nervously. There was a darkness underneath her eyes that told Dazai she hadn't been sleeping well.

Dazai could relate.

Instead of voicing any concern, as a better person probably would have, Dazai offered Ginny only a cheerful grin. "It's been a while!"

"It's been all semester," Ginny agreed, something sad in her voice. Her eyes briefly flicked to Blaise before filling with confusion. Right—they had never really met, had they? *"Um...* Percy said you were looking for me?"

"That's right," Dazai said. "Now's a good time, isn't it?"

"Well—"

Dazai clapped, a grin splitting across his face. "Great! We can't talk in your common room, but I think you'll prefer we do this in private anyway. Not to worry, of course. I know the perfect place."

Percy and Ginny stared at him, looking flabbergasted at his sudden taking charge. Meanwhile, Blaise only watched on with his typical, blank stare. He was obviously used to Dazai's antics by now.

“Can’t you talk here?” Percy asked, a worried pinch to his expression.

Dazai didn’t think anyone would appreciate him accusing Ginny of the petrifications in the middle of the hall. But he couldn’t exactly *say* that.

Instead, he told Percy, “I didn’t think you’d want your sister to be seen talking with the Demon Student.”

Percy’s mouth snapped shut and something flashed across his face.

“I thought so,” Dazai said. He turned his focus back to Ginny, who was still staring at him like she wasn’t quite sure what to make of him. “Again, you’ll want to talk where we can’t be overheard. For more reason than one, you understand.”

Dazai met her eyes unblinking. Something flashed across Ginny’s expression. Fear? Shock? Dazai wasn’t exactly sure. But she had certainly read the underlying meaning in Dazai’s request.

“I’m not sure—” Percy started.

“I’ll come,” Ginny cut him off. Percy startled, whirling on his sister with wide eyes. She ignored him, all her focus on Dazai now. “Where did you have in mind?”

Dazai beamed. “A place no one will bother us,” he said while turning to Blaise, “lead the way, Blaise!”

As always, his second in command was quick to pick up on Dazai’s train of thought. Blaise blinked. “That’s an awful idea.”

“Is it? Where else would you have us go?”

Blaise stared for a second. Then, he let out a weary sigh. “Draco is going to yell.”

Dazai’s smile only widened.

“Uh... where exactly are you lot going?” Percy gaped.

-

Ginny gasped.

“Wh-where did this come from?!”

Dazai turned a charming grin her way. His eyes were lit with humor. He'd almost look cute like this, Ginny thought, if that amusement weren’t so sharply pointed at her expense. “I don’t know what mean,” he teased.

“The door!” Ginny protested. “It just appeared out of nowhere! How—*why—”*

Dazai cackled. He'd—or more accurately *Blaise* (Dazai kept getting lost on the way, so Blaise had done most of the leading)—taken them to a standard hallway. But as they approached, a door had suddenly and magically appeared on the wall. *How?* And *why?* And—*what?!*

"Enough teasing," Dazai's friend—Blaise, she recalled—said. He had raised a hand as if to pacify them both. Then, he turned a flat look to Ginny. Despite the fact Blaise's expression was perfectly blank, he somehow carried the mien of someone fondly exasperated at their friend's antics. "We aren't exactly sure. But this room appears here whenever we're looking for it, so we've been using it as an office."

Ginny gawped. She looked to the door, then back to the two boys again. "An office?"

"For planning pranks and chaos," Dazai answered vaguely.

Without further explanation, Dazai gripped a gloved hand on the doorknob and swung it open. He invited himself in first. Blaise gestured for Ginny to enter, then followed behind. When Blaise shut the door, Ginny couldn't help the trickle of fear that curdled in her gut.

It wasn't that she *feared* them, necessarily. But...

Well, there were *rumors.* About the Demon Student. About his friend.

She cleared her throat.

"That was awfully fast—"

Ginny jumped at the new voice.

Across the office, sitting behind an ornate wood desk, the Slytherin bully Draco Malfoy stared at her, expression aghast.

Draco blinked several times, clearly just as surprised to see *her* as she was to see *him.*

Then, all at once, Draco's shock morphed into livid sneer. He whirled on Dazai and Blaise.

"Why did you bring her here?!"

Ginny flinched.

Dazai shrugged, nonchalant. He crossed the room with a steady, unbothered gate and only stopped once he reached the desk. He clicked his tongue. "Who cares? Get out of my chair, Draco."

"No one is supposed to know I'm involved with you!" Draco hissed lowly to Dazai. Ginny had to strain to hear it. Curiosity prickled at her upon hearing those words. What sort of relationship did these two have? "Now she knows!"

Dazai blew a raspberry. "Shouldn't you be thanking me? You wanted to be involved. I'm involving you."

“Wha—I didn’t say that!”

“It was implied. Seriously, get out of my chair.”

Draco sputtered. But after a second, he did in fact stand up. He walked to the front of the desk and folded his arms defensively over his chest.

“Don’t mind them,” Blaise said quietly. Ginny nearly screamed—Blaise was such an understated presence compared to the other two, she’d nearly forgotten his closeness. “They’re always like this. Why don’t you take a seat?”

Ginny nodded. When Blaise showed her to the couch, the tiny coil of tension unfurled some in from her chest. She let out a breath.

Blaise took a seat beside her at the other arm of the couch.

Meanwhile, Dazai hopped up onto the desktop. Despite the fuss he’d made about the chair, he’d evidently decided to forgo using it. When Draco realized this, he shot the Demon Student an annoyed glance.

Ginny wondered, distantly, if she should laugh or scream.

Then, Ginny screamed.

"A-a-a-a dragon!"

Across the room, pressed up into a pile of cloths and papers, a small, black dragon startled at her shriek. It hissed and shot daggers at her.

Ginny scrunched up against the couch. "I-it—!"

"Relax," Dazai drawled from the desk. Beside Ginny, Blaise gave her a pat on the shoulder that was probably meant to be reassuring but wasn't at all. "That's Egg. She's mostly not feral anymore."

"Mostly!?"

Draco, who looked stiff and uncomfortable standing beside Dazai (like some sort of bodyguard, Ginny thought absurdly), grumpily said, "I trained her myself. She's not feral at all, Dazai."

Dazai shrugged, evidently careless. But a second later, he turned to Ginny and silently mouthed, *'mostly.'*

Ginny giggled a little hysterically.

Dazai smiled back, and Ginny thought maybe he was feeling just as frenetic as she was. But a second later, that strange, harried glimmer in his expression melted away. The shift seemed very controlled. Flipping a switch or throwing a blanket over it.

Dazai laced his fingers together—at once the picture of serene. He looked a bit scary like that, if Ginny was being honest. But her brothers seemed to love him. And after seeing how everyone else had decided to blindly hate him? Ginny was more than willing to give him a chance.

Still.

Dazai had scary eyes, she thought.

“How has Hogwarts been treating you, Ginny?”

She startled out of her thoughts, jumping to meet Dazai’s dark, calculating eyes. He was smiling at her, and his words were pleasant enough. But something still turned her stomach.

Ginny forced a smile. “It’s been good. *Um...* I made a friend.”

“Luna Lovegood, right?” Dazai asked.

Ginny nodded. Luna had mentioned that they’d met. She was under the strange impression that Dazai was an exorcist or something, and Ginny didn’t have the wherewithal to tell her otherwise. It wouldn’t do to chase off her one and only friend, after all...

“I thought so. She talks a lot, doesn’t she?” The corners of Dazai’s eyes crinkled. “And has some kind of obsession with her father’s paper.”

Ginny bristled, entirely on her friend’s behalf. “It’s only natural, I think, to want to be involved in your family’s work,” she defended.

Dazai blinked, looking startled at Ginny’s defensive words. That expression was gone within the second, however. It was replaced with a disgruntled looking frown—like Dazai was somehow annoyed with what Ginny had said. Almost absurdly, it occurred to Ginny to ask what Dazai’s parents did for a living. But she carefully kept her mouth shut on the topic, wary of stepping on toes.

“If you say so,” he grumbled.

Oddly enough, Ginny noted, Draco was making a similarly offput expression beside him.

“Ah...” Ginny hemmed. From his spot at the desk, Dazai sobered quickly. “Not that I don’t want to chat but... there was a reason you wanted to talk, right?” She stopped just shy of saying exactly what they were going to talk about. Or, at least, what she *thought* they were going to talk about. Because for all it had been gnawing at Ginny for weeks now, had anyone else *really* noticed?

Her eyes guiltily dropped away. They landed on Egg, who seemed to have fallen asleep some short while ago.

“I suppose we should get down to business,” Dazai said in agreement. He pinned her down with a heavy stare that Ginny flinched against. *Did he also think—?* “Tell me about Lucius Malfoy.”

Ginny blinked, opened her mouth, then blinked again.

"Huh?"

Now, it was everyone else's turn to look confused.

Draco's brows furrowed angrily after he recovered himself. "What do you mean *'huh?'* Just tell us what my father said to you. Or what he gave you or threatened you with. Whatever."

Completely flabbergasted, Ginny looked between the three of them.

What in Merlin's name were these three up to? And more importantly: what did this have to do with *her?* Ginny had assumed they wanted to talk to her about her... blackouts. All the missing time. About any of the deeply distressing things that she'd come to associate with her losing time.

But here they were talking about... about Draco's dad *threatening* her? *What?* The twins had said Dazai liked to skirt around rules. But this? Immediately, Ginny was feeling well in over her head.

"Draco," Blaise chided. "She clearly hasn't met with Mr. Malfoy."

Draco shot him a pointed look.

Ginny glanced to both of them, horribly confused and looking for purchase. Lastly, she turned to Dazai, who'd been quiet ever since asking about Draco's dad. He was still perched at the desk, but his expression was deeply contemplative now. Upon realizing she was watching him, Dazai's lip turned up into a thin smile.

Ginny returned it shakily.

"That's alright," Dazai said, voice pleasant enough to pacify. Unlike Draco, he didn't seem particularly angered by Ginny's ignorance. He only looked thoughtful over new information.

"How is that alright?" Draco raised a brow. "She's our one lead, and she knows nothing."

Dazai tipped his chin to acknowledge the point. "There are other ways to manipulate someone than to talk to them, Draco."

"Like by spreading inflammatory stories about them in the Daily Prophet?" Blaise asked.

Dazai shot him a glance. "That's certainly one way to do it," he said—no mention of how Blaise's example directly related to his own experiences. Ginny looked between them nervously. "I was thinking something else, though."

"What's that?"

"Well, let's start with something a little more important than speculation," Dazai said. Then, all at once, his light demeanor shriveled entirely. Something heavy and cold replaced it. It felt as though he'd stacked a ton of stones in Ginny's stomach with that one look alone.

Even Draco and Blaise went tense at the shift.

“Ginny, are you responsible for the petrifications of Mrs. Norris and Collin Creevey?”

Ice froze her veins.

Ginny’s entire body went stiff. A chill racked up her spine.

All the thoughts in her head suddenly went still.

“I’ll take that as a yes, then,” Dazai was saying. Ginny could barely hear him.

“I—” Ginny choked out. It caught in her throat meanly. “I’m not—or at least, I don’t *think* I am. I *hope* not...”

Draco’s eyes narrowed in obvious disbelief.

Blaise merely hummed. “What do you mean, *you don’t think so?”*

Ginny looked between them as she twisted her heels nervously on the floor. She pulled at her fingers. “Since you wanted to talk, you must think I’m guilty.”

“Not necessarily,” Dazai said. Suddenly, he hopped off the desk and crossed the distance between them. He leaned forward to peer intently into her eyes. Ginny held her breath. “How about this? Tell me your side of the story, and I’ll do everything in my power to ensure you don’t face recompense.”

“You can’t do that,” Ginny said, wilting away from Dazai’s intense stare. Seeming to sense her discomfort, he pulled back as well. “You’re just a student, too. People may be scared of you, but the headmaster won’t just overlook my... what I’ve done because you say so.”

“Maybe,” was all Dazai said to that. But he wore a look on his face as though that weren’t entirely the truth.

A cloud of smoke filled up the air above Egg's bed.

Blaise cleared his throat. “Why don’t you tell us what’s going on, and we’ll see from there.”

Ginny drew in a breath.

She really wanted to get this off her chest.

But Dazai—and his friends by extension—were supposed to be monsters. Could she really trust them?

Except that for monsters, they were being awfully nice. Offering to hear her out without retribution, and the implication that they would try to help her out of whatever was going on... She wanted help. She wanted help *so much* she would ask a monster for its clawed hand to drag her out of all this nonsense.

Ginny had wanted to vent her thoughts to her brothers, but they always seemed so busy. And when Percy found the time for her, Ginny's mouth had only glued itself shut.

They'll hate me.

She couldn't shake that thought.

Dazai had been nice to her on the train. He was being nice now.

"I... I don't really know," Ginny said slowly. Her audience leaned forward in interest. "It started at the very beginning of the year."

"Started?"

"The first petrification was fairly early in the year..."

Ginny shook her head. "Not the petrifications. Well—not *just* that." She squeezed her palms together, then released it with a breath. "My memories started getting... kind of fuzzy. There are entire days I just? Don't really remember. Or, I'd be with Luna one minute and the next thing I know I'm out by the groundskeeper's hut."

"Blackouts?" Dazai asked. "That's what happened the other day. At the game."

"You saw that?" Ginny asked. She sighed. "I remember going to the game. And I remember sitting with Percy, since Luna was busy with a project... but that's all. Next thing I know, someone is screaming. There was a petrification just there, and it *must* have been me, right? It's the same with the first one—Mrs. Norris? I come to with *blood on my hands!* And it's not the first time, either! I'll wake up with a—*a dead chicken* in my hands, or something! *Oh,* Dazai, can you really help me? I feel like I'm going insane!"

Dazai hummed, clearly thoughtful over the information.

Blaise and Draco, however, looked utterly shocked. *That* was more the reaction Ginny had been expecting. After all, she hardly believed herself!

She felt guilty. And that was the only explanation, wasn't it? Ginny was responsible for the petrifications, and somehow Dazai had figured it out. She just didn't understand *why*. Or *how*.

Why me? She'd thought no small number of times. *Have I done something wrong? Am I out of control? A bad person?*

"Do you have any idea what that means, Dazai?" Blaise asked, stripping Ginny from her thought.

She looked between them, feeling a mix of hopeful and despairing.

Draco leaned in close to Dazai and spoke quietly, but Ginny could still make out his words. "My father isn't here to keep casting a controlling spell on her. Anyway, that sounds a lot like

the Imperius Curse... it's illegal. My father would never risk casting it. Assuming she's telling the truth, it has to be something else."

Ginny shot to her feet. "I am telling the truth!"

Dazai shot them both a quelling look. "I'm sure you are." He turned. "And Draco, considering the circumstances, I wouldn't be so confident in Lucius' moral compass if I were you."

Draco shifted in place uncomfortably.

"Hm..." Dazai rubbed his chin with a gloved finger. "Any ideas, Blaise?"

"You said you'd sometimes find dead animals when you came out of a blackout?"

Ginny nodded. Just thinking about it made her want to run to the bathroom and scrub her hands clean.

Dazai tilted his head. But when he spoke, it was clear he was on an entirely different train of thought than Blaise had been. "Say, Ginny—did anything else strange happened at the start of the year? Perhaps even before them. Like at Diagon Alley?"

She frowned, reeling at the shift and simultaneously racking her brain to remember. "Angel wandered off again? Well, no. That's not entirely unusual..." She trailed off. *Diagon Alley...* Dazai had asked specifically about it, so it must mean something important... *Oh!*

Realization must have shown on her face, because they boys had all perked up suddenly.

"Um... when I got home after going to Flourish and Blotts, I found a diary hidden within my things. I—I hadn't meant to steal it, only I must have grabbed it accidentally? And, well, my parents aren't particularly well off, so I thought it couldn't hurt to keep it. Otherwise I'd never get such a nice diary like that..."

Dazai, Blaise, and Draco all shared a look.

This *did* mean something to them.

Worry turned Ginny's stomach.

"Um... I've never heard of a diary quite like it before. It responds to whatever you write in it." She looked away, embarrassed. "I was... am lonely. I write in it quite a lot... *Um.* You don't think this has anything to do with my blackouts, do you?"

Ginny couldn't quite imagine it. It was only a journal, after all! And one she quite liked, at that. But if they thought the diary might be related, somehow...

Ginny desperately wanted to be free from this secret burden.

"What do you mean, it responds?" Dazai asked.

"Oh! Well, I tell it about my day, and it offers advice—or just an open ear." She frowned. "My diary is strange, sure. But it's not at fault! With everything going on this year, I think chatting with it is the only thing keeping me sane."

"And you got it, unknowingly, at Flourish and Blotts?" Draco asked, his entire visage serious. Ginny shivered a little to be the recipient of such a severe expression.

She nodded.

"It's definitely the diary," Draco said, certain.

"That does seem most likely, given what we know," Blaise agreed. "And I've never heard of a diary that can respond to what's written. It's unusual."

"It's *suspicious,"* Draco corrected. "At the very least, it's worth checking out."

Dazai nodded, evidently satisfied with where their conversation had ended up. Meanwhile, Ginny was only feeling more out of her depths than before.

But if they thought they had a lead...

For the first time since boarding the Hogwart's train, Ginny felt a curdle of desperate, hopeful relief bloom in her chest. She had thought she'd been in this utterly alone. But here was Dazai and his friends, believing her every word and working to find a solution. The empty reassurances from her diary suddenly seemed to mean nothing at all.

"Thank you," she said, eyes tearing up. "Thank you so much. You don't know how scared I've been."

Ginny really wasn't alone anymore.

"Don't thank us yet," Dazai said. But Ginny didn't care—even for just *listening,* she wanted to thank them a hundred times over. "Bring me your diary, and I'll see if we can't finish this up before winter break."

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading! :) happy birthday!

next up: Ginny's suspicious diary.

Home

Chapter Summary

Some concerns about Dazai's next course of action.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the center of the desk, a leather-bound diary sat in perfect stillness. Though it had been handled with excess care, the spine was broken and the pages yellowed. A beam of light caught on it. The book seemed to glow.

“...Well?”

Dazai blinked out of his silent musings. He turned to Draco, who was watching him with an anxious expression.

“Well what?”

Draco huffed, then kicked forward until he was just a foot away from the desk. Despite the edge to his whole demeanor, however, Dazai noticed he made a point to not get too close to Ginny’s diary. “What now? Getting the diary is what my father wants from you, right? We’re done now?”

“Are you going to have Featherbrain ship that to your boss?” Blaise asked.

“Even though we’re pretty sure this is what Lucius wants...” Dazai trailed off with a hum. He leaned forward on a palm, deep in thought. Usually, Dazai wasn’t one to hesitate about conclusions like this. But...

Dazai let his senses run over the diary. And although the office was always abuzz with magical energy, the diary seemed to be giving off *none of it.*

Well... that wasn’t entirely accurate. The diary had magic. But it had no more than any random wizard Dazai could pass in the halls might. Compared to the Philosopher’s Stone and the Sensing Stone? This thing barely qualified as magical at all! But it wasn’t the nearly imperceptible magic that was bothering Dazai—nor was it the uncertainty of a job-well-done.

What was bothering Dazai was that the diary felt more like a *person* than an *artifact.*

“Dazai?”

“What do you mean *pretty sure?* I thought we were done!”

For the second time in as many minutes, Dazai startled out of his thoughts. This time, Draco's worry was replaced with irritation.

"Ah." Dazai rolled his shoulders tightly. The muscle clicked. "Our research was solid. Now it's just a matter of verifying things."

"I'm not sure any of our reputations could handle being blamed for another petrification," Blaise said. Draco winced at the comment. "Waiting to see if another one happens is risky."

Dazai nodded, eyes flicking to Blaise appreciatively as he spoke. "So we won't wait around." He tapped a gloved finger on the book's peeling cover. There wasn't really any magic there to nullify... but Dazai wasn't taking any chances. The gloves would stay on just in case. "Remember what Ginny said the other day? Evidently," he tapped the book again in point, "this ugly little thing can talk."

Draco reeled back immediately. "You can't seriously be planning to write in it!"

Dazai made a face. He looked to Blaise for support, only to find—

"That's an awful idea, Dazai."

"Wha—" he stuttered. "Aren't you supposed to be on my side, Blaise? You're my second! What's with all this hostility?"

"I'm being pragmatic." Blaise lifted his chin to watch Dazai through pointed eyes. "And you're doing something recklessly self-sacrificial again. This book *corrupted* Ginny. It can corrupt you too."

"You think so?" Dazai asked, almost hopeful. "Getting corrupted is kind of like dying, isn't it?"

"She only lost her memories," Blaise countered.

Dazai sighed.

Draco scoffed. He stared down at the book, then back to Dazai, derisive. "Writing in the book that made the Weasley girl go nuts is the definition of self-sacrificial. It's like you *want* to be its next victim."

Dazai considered this for a moment. Then, he shook his head.

"You're both missing the point," he said, ignoring the twin looks of disappointment he got in return. "For one: I won't be using it for no good reason, like Ginny was. Since it's for a job I'll stay on top of things. Second: it probably used magic to corrupt her. Seeing as I can't be affected by magic, I'll be fine."

Blaise softened at that, but Draco still didn't look convinced.

"And third," Dazai continued, crooning, "I have you two looking out for me. If I start zoning out and walking around covered in blood, it's up to Blaise and Draco to fix me!"

Draco raised a brow. “You were zoning out just a minute ago.”

Blaise nodded, entirely deadpan. “I’ve seen you do both of those things before, Boss. On multiple occasions.”

Dazai coughed into his fist. “Right, well. Starting now.”

“You’re absolutely hopeless.”

“You love me anyway.”

Draco sputtered, his cheeks dusting over pink.

Blaise stifled a laugh at the reaction. Dazai wasn’t so kind, and cackled loudly.

The light atmosphere only stayed for a moment longer, however. Once their laughter died down, a heavy-set tension settled in the air. Their eyes all fell to the diary at once.

Right.

Down to business.

Dazai drew in a breath. Then, with a methodical hand he usually reserved for Mori’s surgical experiments, Dazai carefully gripped the diary’s cover and opened it.

The first page was blank.

“Blank?” Draco asked, already leaning over the desk again. Whatever trepidation he’d held before was either gone now, or temporarily put on hold. “I thought Ginny said she wrote in it all the time. Figures she was lying.”

Blaise came up on his side. “Not necessarily. It could have a self-erasing charm.”

A quick flip through the book revealed every page to be empty of text—Ginny's handwriting or otherwise. The diary’s cracked spine was the only indication anyone had ever opened it at all. Dazai considered for a second, before deciding on a course of action. He grabbed a quill from the desk, daubed it in ink, and hovered it over the page. “Only one way to find out.” He peered up to Draco and Blaise. “Anything you want to tell it?”

“Ask if my father—” Draco suddenly squeaked to a halt. “No, no. I’m not talking to a book. That’s got to be below me, right? Blaise, is this below me?”

Blaise hummed. “Tell it to stop being evil.”

“Horrible ideas, both of you,” Dazai said. “We’ll go with my plan, then.”

Draco sniffed, looking embarrassed. “I want it on the record that I think this is an awful idea.”

“I concur.”

Dazai rolled his eyes. “Dully noted.”

Without further ado, he set the quill to paper. Ink bled out from the point of contact.

As neatly as he could print, Dazai wrote:

‘Hello! Anyone home in here?’

The black ink seemed to soak up immediately, and a second passed without any response. Over the desk, Draco squinted to read the words upside-down. When he did...

“Wha—Dazai! What kind of casual question is that!?”

Dazai guffawed. “I don’t want to scare it off!”

“Making friends with the evil book isn’t any better than Blaise’s idea!”

“It’s hardly any *worse—”*

Suddenly, the office door *clicked.*

The three Slytherins immediately tensed up.

Dazai was the first to react, swiping the diary off the desk and throwing it on his lap just as the door swung open. Unless someone were to crawl under the desk, they wouldn’t notice the diary’s presence. It was hidden under the long sleeves of his robes and the wood desktop. A frantic glance from Draco and Blaise showed they were just as worried about the diary being spotted. Dazai offered them a thin-lipped, reassuring smile in response.

All’s well, that smile seemed to say.

Not a second later, Fred, George, Hermione, and Ron appeared at the doorway.

Upon seeing Draco, Blaise, and Dazai already present, they blinked, startled. Equally surprised faces stared back at them.

Fred and George shook of the shock quickly. They beamed.

“What’s this?”

“A secret snake gathering? And we weren’t invited?”

Draco scowled and Blaise merely shrugged.

For his part, Dazai offered a flippant grin. “You know how Slytherins are. Always lying and keeping secrets.”

Ron snorted as he made his way across the room. He flopped into the sofa with an *umph!* Hermione sat next to him a few seconds later. “Is that *Dazai* lecturing us about house politics? Now I *know* something is up.”

Dazai rolled his eyes, exasperated.

“Really, Boss,” Fred chirped, “if you lot are planning some kind of Slytherin scheme, we want in!”

“Just pretend we’re not Gryffindor. I promise not to spread any nasty snake secrets we learn! Cross my heart, hope to—”

“We were just talking,” Draco snapped. Across the room, Fred and George feigned hurt at the harsh tone. “Mind your business.”

Before anyone could get another word in—and sincerely hoping to mitigate any potential fighting—Dazai cleared his throat. Everyone turned to him at once. “How have sales been lately?”

The twins perked up, but not nearly as brightly as Ron did.

“Fantastic!” Ron said. He was practically bouncing in his seat. Then, as self-declared Bookkeeper for this operation, he confidently declared, “We made nearly double on this week’s test compared to what we were making at the start of the semester!” He bounded over to the chalkboard to write down their earnings. He circled the sum with a grin.

“Sure did,” Fred said proudly.

While scrabbling around his cloak’s inner pocket, George told them, “Enough galleons to fund a very expensive, Hogwarts-wide prank! Or, you know. Split it seven ways even.” As he spoke, George withdrew several clumsy handfuls of gold, silver, and bronze coins. He unloaded them onto Dazai’s desk.

Metallic *clanks* echoed noisily around the room.

When the racket finally stopped, Dazai plucked a sickle from the pile and rolled it between his fingers.

Blaise leaned forward to eye the cash with some interest. Though Draco looked more concerned with how gracelessly George had handled the coins. Needing no further instruction, Draco started to rearrange the pile into something more orderly. It wasn’t long before the bulk of their returns became apparent.

This was a good haul—Ron hadn’t been kidding. Sure, it was nothing compared to the dough Port Mafia raked in every day. But for Hell’s Hounds’ first real job? A smashing success! Dazai couldn’t help but to preen with pride. He’d assigned his friends a task, and then accomplished it in bounds.

He’d like to see Father do that. These days, it felt more like Mori was the boss than Father.

“Hey...”

Dazai flicked his sickle. It spun several times in the air before he caught it again. *“Hm?”*

Blaise was glancing between the coins and the far corner of the room. When Dazai followed his gaze, he found Egg lazily watching their exchange. A curl of smoke rose up from her nose, but otherwise, she didn't spare them any action.

"Egg isn't the type of dragon that hoards gold, is she?"

Fred and George stiffened at the question. They took a wary step away from the pile, needing no further reason to back off than giving a feral dragon her space.

Dazai tossed the coin again. "Nah," he said, eyeing the listless dragon. She looked tired, and Dazai felt some level of sympathy for her because of it. He'd had enough sleepless nights to ache at just the thought. "Speaking of Egg, I was thinking about taking her home over break."

Surprised silence answered him.

Ron shook his head, and a second later he was standing. "You're taking her home? But she lives here!"

"She's *my* dragon," Draco protested at the same time.

"She was mine first!"

Dazai glanced between them. "Either of you could take her, if you want." At their affronted expressions, Dazai sighed. "Her growth will be stunted if we keep her cooped up in here forever. I think some time to fly free would make her more ferocious!"

Ferocious—as if a feral dragon wasn't the last thing Dazai needed.

To be honest, Egg wasn't exactly Dazai's... *proudest moment.* Really, Dazai had only raised her to get one up on Quirrell. And now that Quirrell was out of the way? Egg was turning into something of a problem. Dazai had half a mind to kill her. That would take care of the issue that was secretly rearing a dragon.

But Dazai's gang liked her.

And maybe, Dazai also...

He shook the thought away like it was dandelion fluff. Couldn't have Featherbrain getting any more jealous, now. Regardless, he probably wouldn't be killing the dragon. Dazai turned an eye onto Draco. He rolled the sickle over his knuckles, showy. Then he palmed it, and the coin vanished from sight. "Assuming Lucius doesn't throw a fit, you're welcome to take her back."

Draco blinked, momentarily startled out of his glare. "I can't just bring a dragon home, Dazai!"

"Why not? You did it last year." Dazai blew a raspberry. "Besides," he added, just quietly enough that only Draco would hear, "I'm sure Lucius would love to house Egg again, if I'm the one asking."

Draco stared at him. There was a suddenly serious set to his face—as if the mention of Port Mafia's involvement with Lucius was enough alone to curdle his whole mood. Dazai opened his mouth to soothe over the sore wound. But before he could get even one word out, Blaise let out an objecting, soft hum.

"You're going home for winter break?"

Dazai tilted his head.

Just on the other side of the desk, Blaise was eyeing him, expression guarded. That contemplative look immediately had Dazai on edge. Blaise when he had something to say could be a real menace.

"I was planning on it," Dazai said as he finally pocketed the sickle. It made a heavy weight of his robe's front pocket.

"Really?" Ron asked. "You stayed here last year."

Fred and George nodded enthusiastically. But there was something considering in their eyes as well. "That's right! We had a holiday party and everything!"

"We harassed Hagrid too, remember?"

"Ah... Good times..."

Dazai huffed, fondly amused. Certainly, last year's winter break had been some kind of ordeal. Dazai's life at Hogwarts hadn't known peace since.

Though... had it ever, really?

"I only stayed last year to practice magic with Quirrell," Dazai told them. He pointedly ignored how most everyone present recoiled at the professor's name. Even though they knew most of the story behind Quirrell's death, Dazai supposed it must still be jarring to talk to a murderer. He sniffed, suddenly feeling soured on the subject. "Anyway, Mori wants me home this time."

So said the letter he'd received just this morning. In light of his progress on Lucius' assignment, Dazai was to return home. To discuss, or plan, or just try on Mori's newest pretty dresses, Dazai had no clue. Seeing as Mori's letter had alluded to *all three,* it was anyone's guess. Dazai hardly had the patience for it.

Yokohama's ports grew cold in the winter. The wind carried frigid sea air on its breath and filled the docks with that unbearable kind of frozenness Dazai detested. But Hogwarts was cold already, too. Dazai supposed it would be the same wherever he went. Boney fingers cold and chapped.

He shifted the robe tighter over his shoulders at just the thought.

"Ugh," Ron moaned, slumping back into the sofa. "Here I was hoping you'd stay. There won't be anyone to hang out with this time. It'll be so boring."

Dazai chuckled. “I thought you’d appreciate not having me around to rope you into schemes.”

“Aw, don’t say that, Snakey!”

Fred and George collapsed into Ron’s sides. They practically smothered him, and earned a loud yelp in response for their efforts. “Ronny here secretly loves your plans!”

George poked his younger brother in the side. Ron squeaked. “And what do you mean *boring?* You’ll have us hanging around!”

“Right-O, little bro!”

Ron flailed against them fruitlessly. “You two don’t count!”

“I’ll be going home as well,” Hermione said. She was leaning away from the Weasley Brother Dog-Pile, looking somehow both fond and annoyed with their antics. *“Um...* what about you two, then?”

Draco gave a polite smile. “The Malfoy family hosts a winter ball every year. Naturally, I’ll be attending.”

“I’m going home,” Blaise told them.

“Of course you are. The party would be boring without you.”

Hermione looked between them, then chuckled a little sadly. “You’ll be together? I’m a bit jealous.”

“You can fly out to Japan, if you want to visit me!”

“Now that’s an idea,” Hermione mused warmly. “If an impractical one.”

Dazai shrugged. Of course, his offer hadn’t been serious in the slightest. Not just anyone was allowed inside Yokohama’s borders. Not without great fuss, at least. And somehow Dazai doubted a friendly visit would be a particularly compelling story for the big-wigs governing Yokohama.

Regardless...

“Anyway,” he said, drawing everyone’s focus back on him. Even Fred and George stopped messing around with Ron when he spoke. “While you lot figure out where Egg is going, I have a class to get to.”

“Right. Your special class with Professor Snape.”

“You’re still doing those?”

Dazai raised a brow. “Last I checked.” With a practiced ease, Dazai pulled open the desk’s drawer. In the same motion he pulled a textbook out, he slipped the diary in. Then he locked

it. “Snape is such a worrywart about magical safety.”

George snorted. “Does he know you call him *Snape?”*

“He does,” Dazai grinned as he stood. “And he’s less than pleased about it.”

“Nice.”

“I’m working my way up to *Severus,”* he told them.

The twins laughed.

A chuckle even surprised itself out of Hermione’s lips at his boldness. She shook herself a second after, as if ashamed to find Dazai’s teasing so amusing. Her expression sobered. “These lessons with Professor Snape... they aren’t like your lessons with Quirrell, are they?”

Dazai blinked. Around him, the rest of the gang suddenly paused as well.

“If you mean,” Dazai said, “is he using our class as a means to get information from me?”

Hermione nodded. “Or hurt you,” she said, voice tight like she hadn’t wanted to voice that thought aloud.

“Information, definitely,” Dazai told them, blasé. “Hurt me, no.”

He’d have to be an idiot not to notice that Snape was prodding him for information. About Yokohama. About Mori. But Dazai got the feeling Snape was just being a worrywart about it. He’d never been led to believe the potion’s master was actually sniffing out the Port Mafia. He was a mild nuisance more than anything.

Something to clear up *after* winter break. Once all this diary nonsense was taken care of.

Fred and George shared a look. “Snape-y wants info from you?”

“Don’t tell me you’re snitching to him!” Fred gasped, faux-devastated.

Dazai raised a brow. “What, about our latest money-making scheme?” He gestured to the neatly-stacked pile of coins on the desk. “Only if you want me to turn myself in,” he teased. Then, “he hasn’t even realized about it yet. Calm down.”

Hermione let out a tight, relieved breath at that. Meanwhile, the twins chuckled. Dazai eyed the group for a second, before standing.

The diary was safe. The gang was (mostly) caught up.

Deciding not to dawdle any longer (he was already going to be about ten minutes late), Dazai walked to the exit. He said a quick goodbye to everyone, paying neither Blaise nor Draco any special attention. He trusted Hell’s Hounds well enough, but that didn’t mean he wanted to risk the other members’ suspicions, still.

Not when he was so close.

Something caught on the door before it could swing shut.

Dazai pulled back from the door as he turned to see what had happened.

Blaise had grabbed the hidden door just seconds before it could close. The toe of his boot had wedged into the gap, holding it open.

Dazai blinked at him. He waited for Blaise to shut the door behind them before saying, “I don’t need an escort this time. I don’t think.”

“Your confidence is inspiring, Boss.”

“Eh,” Dazai waved his book around lamely. He didn’t know why he still brought the stupid thing to class, other than to look busy when Snape glared his way. It was an interesting read for all the *day* it took him to pick through it.

“What do you mean, *eh.”* Blaise made a face. He didn’t object when Dazai started walking again, only saddled up beside him. They picked though mostly empty halls—by now well used to the stares sent their way. “Going home for winter break, *hm?”*

Dazai shot him a passive glance. “That’s what you followed me out here about?”

“It is.”

Dazai hummed. “I am. I need to pass on *you-know-what* to Mori. Get information on what my next job will be. Boring stuff like that. Blaise will understand when he gets a job someday. Unless you want to be a house husband?”

“It hadn’t occurred to me,” Blaise said.

“Consider it. You’re very good at doting.”

Blaise sniffed out a quiet laugh. But his typical demeanor was back within the second. “You know, you don’t have to go home if you don’t want to.”

Dazai glanced at him. “Aren’t you listening? I have things do to back there.”

“I mean,” Blaise said, staring forward blankly, “wouldn’t you prefer to stay here over break? Do something horrible with the twins again.”

Dazai considered this. Then, he hastily shook his head. “What a weird question. Blaise should know better than to ask something like this.”

“I don’t say it to be mean.”

“Blaise is always saying mean things.”

Blaise hummed, evidently too used to Dazai's prods by now to react any other way. "It's the things you say. And the little things you do." His steady gaze turned onto Dazai, hovering pointedly over bandaged wrists. "That make me think you don't like home very much."

Dazai's shoulders drew upwards. "I don't like much of anything."

Blaise glanced at him. The discomfort must have been clear across Dazai's entire being, because he pulled back. "I only mean—I like to think I know you pretty well. I'd think you would prefer to stay here, rather than with someone you clearly don't like."

Prefer to stay...

Dazai sighed, tired. The idea rankled against his brain—sour for all it was *true.* Hanging around *Mori*, or his *friends?* The choice was obvious for Dazai. One grated on every last one of his nerves, and the other was always a promise for fun. Sly smile and sharp words, or friendly banter and secret glances. The discrepancy left something to be desired.

But.

"That's not how the world works at all, Blaise," Dazai said with growing impatience. "Anyway, I do important stuff for the Port Mafia, you know? To leave Mori scrambling without me would be—" *entertaining* "—evil."

Blaise came to a sudden stop, and Dazai nearly tripped to stop with him.

"Aren't you already a villain, Dazai?" Blaise asked, serious.

"Everyone here seems to think so."

"Then I think you should choose to be selfish, about going home or not..." Blaise trailed off. Then, before Dazai could make sense of his meaning, Blaise inclined his head towards Snape's office. "We're here."

"Oh." Dazai blinked. "Really?"

Blaise nodded. "I think you still need an escort after all, Boss. Have a good lesson."

"Cryptic as ever, Second," Dazai called after him.

He watched Blaise walk for another few seconds before deciding to finally make his entrance in Snape's office. He wasn't *that* late, all things considered. But Snape could still be a stickler when he wanted to be.

...Choose to be selfish, huh?

Wasn't he already doing that?

Dazai turned on his heels, steps purposeful and clacking on the tile. He threw open the door.

“Snape! I’m here for my lesson!” He cheered and slammed the door at his back. The *bang!* was loud enough to rattle potions.

Snape swore, hastily reaching out to grab a green potion before it could fall off his desk.

Dazai nearly laughed. But he stopped short upon realizing Madam Pomfrey was sitting in on this class as well. She was watching their exchange with an exasperated sort of expression.

“Mr. Dazai, what have I said about calling me that? And don’t make such a—”

Dazai plopped down into his seat with a vocal *oomph!* He kicked Snape’s desk while crossing his legs.

“—ruckus.” Snape groaned. His brow twitched. “You’re in a mood today.”

Dazai tilted his head. *“Oh?* I didn’t know Snape was so attentive of me.”

Snape grit his teeth, looking about a second from popping a blood vessel somewhere vital.

“I’m just kidding, Sir,” Dazai soothed half-heartedly. Snape didn’t look convinced. “A friend suggested I try and be more selfish. Since I wanted to annoy Snape today, I decided to commit to it.”

“Don’t take advice from the Weasley twins.”

Dazai grinned, but didn’t correct his professor. Instead, he cheekily prodded, “you’re only upset I won our bet over Quidditch the other day!”

Snape eyed him for a moment. Only once he was certain Dazai was going to behave himself did Snape finally release his iron-tight grip on the potion. He set it down beside a stack of student essays Dazai hadn’t participated in.

Pomfrey cleared her throat, expression distinctly amused. “Now, now, you two...”

Snape shot her a glare.

Dazai smiled pleasantly. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. “Madam Pomfrey is here today again, *hm?* Are we finally moving on to a cooler spell?”

Snape looked like he wanted to scold Dazai again, but Pomfrey was quicker to the chase.

“Based on my observations, I do believe you’re ready to move onto more powerful spells,” she said, voice warm. Dazai perked up in interest. “Perhaps some basic transfiguration would interest you?”

“Regardless of what interests him, that’s what he’s learning next,” Snape trampled over Dazai’s excitement.

“Like *match to needle?”* Dazai asked. He recalled trying to learn that particular spell last year and failing spectacularly. That had been so early in the year, Dazai hadn’t even been able

to conjure up the magic to make himself ill. The match had just stubbornly sat there, pointless.

Snape nodded. He reached into his desk and withdrew a matchbook. Then, he plucked out two match sticks and set them on the desk.

Dazai grinned, pleased with himself for having guessed correctly. He drew his wand out without needing to be told.

“Not so fast.” Snape held up a hand.

Dazai deflated.

“We’ll start with an example,” Snape said as he pulled his own wand out. Dazai followed the movement carefully.

An example *would* be helpful. Though he’d spent the better part of one-and-a-half years feeling classmates cast transfigurations spells, and didn’t know how necessary it was. Transfiguration spells all had fundamentally the same magical signature, he thought. But Dazai had only ever tried casting once. A refresher might be useful.

Snape watched him, waiting for Dazai’s affirming nod before casting.

Instinctively, Dazai perked up as magic swirled to life in the air.

The match elongated and sharpened at the point. It shifted color—from a woody brown to a shiny silver. The transformation only lasted for a few seconds, but Dazai could still feel the magic zapping around it for a moment more.

Same old feeling. Dazai could replicate that.

He glanced to Snape before lifting his own wand, wanting express permission lest he draw the professor's ire again. Snape and Pomfrey shared a glance. It wasn’t until Pomfrey’s quill was hovering over her notes that Snape gave him the go-ahead.

Dazai paid them no mind. By now, he was well used to Pomfrey documenting their classes. The scrutiny would only put him on edge if he let it. But her notes were mostly medical in nature, and therefore not of much concern to him. It wasn’t like they were actually going to be able to deduce No Longer Human’s existence.

Dazai waved his wand in the same tight motion Snape had. He focused his magic in that familiar shape transfiguration took—something revolving and strange. It swirled up at the tip of his wand and—

The match rolled.

Dazai stared down at it.

That should have worked. Everything *felt* right, so why..?

“Do you need another example?” Pomfrey asked, drawing Dazai from his blistering thoughts. Her quill had stalled over the paper, and Dazai frowned at it in offence.

“No,” he grumbled. Maybe if he focused more on the chemical composition of the match-needle...

Nothing.

Dazai grit his teeth. This feeling of repeated failure was annoyingly familiar. Wasn’t he passed this by now?

He tried casting again. And while the magic around them changed shape, the match did not. Snape’s own needle seemed to mock him.

Snape, once more, held up a hand to stop Dazai from casting again.

“Let’s try something else.”

Dazai rubbed his fingers along his wand’s grain. “I don’t need to try a different spell. I just need to figure out which part I’m doing wrong.”

It wasn’t the shape or the feel of the magic. Dazai was certain that was correct! And it wasn’t as if he didn’t remember all of the basic transfiguration matrices. Transfiguration didn’t have a corresponding verbal cast, so he wasn’t failing to pronounce anything correctly, either.

Snape grunted a sound of acknowledgement. “I don’t mean a different spell.”

Dazai blinked. “You don’t?”

Pomfrey’s quill tapped thoughtfully against the page. Both Snape and Dazai turned their attentions to her.

“How about we try to walk through it, together?” She asked. Then, with a quick glance to her notes, she continued, “Mr. Dazai, just what magical sensation are you attempting to replicate when you cast this spell?”

Magic buzzed incessantly in Dazai’s ears.

“Hm?”

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. “Don’t act coy,” he groaned.

“That’s how you’ve been casting until now, isn’t it?” Pomfrey asked. “Observing the magic being cast around you and recreating it?”

Defensive, Dazai leaned away from the desk. But that slight motion was answer enough.

Snape looked, briefly, exhausted. “As we thought. Problem Child, if you’d explained how you were working earlier, we could have shaped our lessons around your method ages ago.”

“You’re truly impressive to use your magical sensitivity in such a way,” Pomfrey said. Dazai shifted uncomfortably at the praise. “Though I have to agree: why did you keep it a secret, when we could have used this information to help you?”

They both stared him down, evidently waiting for an answer.

Dazai bristled, the words *‘because I don’t trust you’* weighing on his tongue. He didn’t voice them aloud. Instead, he leaned on the more comfortable persona of *bumbling idiot.*

“Hm? Is that something Snape would want to know?”

Snape grit his teeth. *“Yes.”*

“Well, you should have said something, then.” Dazai flapped a hand around. “Here I was thinking you didn’t care.”

“Obviously I care, brat.”

“Really? With all that barking and spitting, I thought you were the type to be angry all the time.”

Poppy cleared her throat. Dazai chose to interpret the fumbling gesture as amused rather than stern. Snape had enough sternness for the both of them.

“Mr. Dazai,” she said, turning a quelling look onto him.

Ah. Not amused, then.

Dazai nodded her way to show he was listening, and Snape made an exaggerated sound once he was turned away.

Pomfrey smiled, pleased. “Describe how the ‘match-to-needle' spell feels for you. Perhaps if we can better understand *how* you learn, we can make this lesson more amenable for you.”

“It doesn’t matter. All transfiguration spells are about the same,” Dazai grumbled. Already, he was wishing he could just bully Snape again. At least that was a productive exercise. “I’m missing something else.”

“Really?” Pomfrey asked, sounding surprised. Dazai eyed the reaction curiously, but turned back to his match rather than comment on it.

In response, Dazai made a vague, turning motion with his hand. That more-or-less summed up transfiguration for him. Spinning, revolving, changing. Like an age-old wheel.

“Manners, Problem Child.”

Dazai blinked.

Right. To Snape and Pomfrey, that gesture probably just looked dismissive. He let his hand drop back into his lap with an unsatisfied *fwhump.*

“If you say so.”

...if it wasn’t chemical make-up or magical know-how, then what else was holding him back?

Something else—something fundamental, obviously, for him to still be struggling with it. Usually, figuring out the right magical signature was enough to get the spell casting properly. That, and the ability to not get a migraine.

“I do say so,” Snape spat.

Dazai brushed him off. “I thought Professor McGonagall was the expert at transfiguration. What are *you* going to help with?”

Snape’s jaw twitched. “I assure you, my talents aren’t limited to merely one subject. As the teacher here, I’d expect more respect.”

“Sure,” Dazai nodded patiently, “you’re only saying that because Professor McGonagall doesn’t like me, right? She doesn’t want to teach me herself?”

Pomfrey and Snape shared a glance. Then, the matron cleared her throat.

“Let’s try to stay focused, okay?” She smiled. “You said you think you’re missing something. What part of the spell is lacking, Mr. Dazai?”

“The part where it works.”

“Clearly,” Snape droned. Dazai shot him an unamused look. “What part *precisely*, Problem Child?”

“I don’t know!” Dazai grasped vaguely at the air. Trying to grab onto that invisible something that would solve his spell. Predictably, no epiphany came to him.

The magic was doing what it was supposed to—changing shape just how Dazai wanted it to. But rather than *do* anything, the magic only flounced about. Completely useless.

He said as much to Pomfrey and Snape.

The matron hummed, the furrow between her brows telling Dazai she was considering his every word carefully. It was a little unnerving. “You have that much control over the magic?” She asked. When Dazai nodded, her contemplative expression only deepened. “And it’s still not working... but you aren’t feeling sick, dear?”

“Not at all,” Dazai brushed off her concerns quickly. He had a good grasp on his magical limits. And between the start of the year and now, Dazai’s limit had grown from one meager spell to several dozen. He wouldn’t be sick for a while yet.

More than just a lack of sickness, spells were coming easier to him as well. Wingardium Leviosa was mastered within one class. Then the wand-lighting charm the class after that. Nowadays, it was a just a matter of 'feel the spell, replicate the spell, call it a day.'

All the more reason why this current set-back was cause for such frustration.

Severus had a similar thoughtful mien about him.

“When you cast,” he said, contemplative, “what are you thinking about?”

Dazai tilted his head, wondering where this line of questioning was going.

What was he thinking about? The spell, obviously! Magic was a simple one-two step of ‘tell the magic what to do’ and ‘make the magic do it.’ There wasn’t anything else to think about. “I’m not getting distracted,” Dazai told him petulantly.

“I mean in regards to the spell, brat. I should hope you aren’t letting your mind wander in the middle of class.”

Dazai made a face. “I’m thinking, *I better figure this spell out quickly or Snape is going to lecture me all weekend.”*

Snape grit his teeth. *“Professor* Snape.”

“Sure. Him too.”

“Now, now, you two,” Pomfrey placated. She tapped her quill against the paper, clearly deep in thought. And though Dazai doubted she was going to be able to solve his current problem, he was at least a little curious as to her current line of thought. “Beginners at transfiguration usually make their mistakes with their wand manipulation.”

Snape grunted. He eyed Dazai's wand hand with some interest. “Clearly, that isn’t Mr. Dazai’s problem. His form is adequate.”

“Yes,” she shook her head, frowning thoughtfully. “Lack of focus is another major mistake.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” Before Dazai could interrupt again, petulant, Snape continued. “Transfiguration spells are very precise. Even a single wayward thought can prevent complete transformation.”

“Hence why beginners often make the match shiny, but not pointed. Or sharp, but still wooden.”

Dazai considered that.

But...

“That’s not right at all,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest. He huffed out a peeved breath. *“Motus Subtilis* was more nitpicky than this.”

On the desk, the match suddenly rolled as if Dazai’s breath had lifted it through sheer irritation alone. Figured his annoyance was more powerful than this shoddy spell.

Snape's eyes snapped to the match first, then to Dazai himself. He wore an expression like he was debating whether or not to scold Dazai for arguing.

In the end, Snape settled on merely glaring.

Dazai turned a glare of his own onto the match, certain he should channel his frustration out onto *it* rather than his own lack of talent.

-

It wasn't a *lack of talent;* transfiguration was just *stupid.*

Dazai was certain of that much. It had been a while since he'd failed so spectacularly at spell casting, and Dazai was only left with the conclusion that transfiguration was some kind of...

Well. Dazai didn't know what. But it clearly worked upon different laws to the rest of magic. If all transfiguration spells had the same magical signature, then there must have been something else. Something Snape wasn't telling him—or maybe didn't know about himself.

An hour. *A full hour.* Practicing the world's stupidest spell to absolutely no result.

Dazai was starting to feel like a first-year again. Waving his wand around to no effect.

But he knew how magic worked now. Could write a whole book on it, if he really wanted to bore himself with the exercise. Something was wrong. Some invisible step to transfiguration that magic alone couldn't act on.

In short: *transfiguration sucked.*

Dazai opened his eyes and the curious faces of Snape and Pomfrey stared back at him.

Another point for transfiguration being stupid: he couldn't sense out any changes to the magical signature even with his eyes closed.

"Transfiguration is the worst," he grunted. Dazai slumped back in the chair, expression peeved and fingers sore around his wand from overuse. "I want to cast cool spells again. Let's do *incendio—"*

Just as he spoke, a flicker of fire spurted out from Dazai's wand. It shot out towards a stack of papers that Snape deftly swiped off the desk. Black charred the desktop, but otherwise didn't spread the flame. Dazai sighed, dispassioned.

"Careful—"

Dazai blew a raspberry. “I’m being careful. That was intentional.”

Snape’s jaw snapped shut.

Pomfrey hummed, evidently unbothered by Dazai’s errant fire magic. She glanced down at her notes, which had been left untouched for several minutes now. “I think,” she said, “we should consult Minerva for the next lesson. I’m sure she’ll have some proper input.”

Snape side-eyed her. “My input is plenty proper.”

“And hers will be more so,” Pomfrey said. “If anyone can discern what is—as Mr. Dazai puts it—*missing* from his spellcasting, Minerva can."

Snape made a sound—presumably thoughtful. But there was a noticeable tension to his face, Dazai saw. Almost like Snape wasn’t entirely on-board with McGonagall’s involvement.

Odd. Dazai had always thought the two professors were fairly close. His eyes narrowed, assessing, but Snape’s face didn’t give any more away.

“...as long as you don’t invite Lockhart,” Dazai said warily.

Snape and Pomfrey blinked.

Then, Pomfrey snorted.

Beside her, Snape looked sick at merely the thought.

Seeing this, Dazai joined in Pomfrey’s delighted giggles.

After a second, Snape finally relented. The corner of his lips twitched upwards vaguely in amusement. He shook his head. “Certainly, that man will not be invited.” He glanced at the door, as if Lockhart might suddenly barge in without warning—a declaration of *‘the hero has arrived!’* on his lips. “He will *never* be invited.”

“That’s the only smart thing you’ve said all lesson, Snape,” Dazai cheerily told him.

Snape’s good mood was immediately dashed. “Remind me why I put up with your insolence again, Problem Child,” he grit out.

“You barely tolerate me, Sir.”

Snape stared him down for a moment, then gruffly spit, *“just* barely.”

“I think,” Pomfrey said, tearing them from their bantering. “Now may be a good time to stop for today.” She cast an exasperated glance to Snape and Dazai both. “Honestly, how you two managed lessons—just the two of you without supervision—is beyond me.”

Snape bristled. “We manage just fine.”

“We’re only sometimes at each other’s throats, Ma’am.”

Pomfrey smiled indulgently his way. Then, serious once more, she rested her notes on her lap. “As for our next step,” she said, “if Minerva is available, I would like to invite her to our next lesson. See what she has to say on the subject.”

Snape nodded, looking his usual stern self at being back on topic. “I agree. Although I doubt she’ll be able...” he paused. “Between her classes, her lions, and her other obligations, Minerva will be hard-pressed to find the time.”

Pomfrey hummed. “Perhaps over winter break?” She inquired. “She’ll have more time—we all will—to commit ourselves to getting Mr. Dazai caught up with his peers.” She paused, already seriously considering continuing their lessons over break.

Snape nodded, also contemplative.

Dazai wondered if he should say something.

“...let's see...”

“...if we tell Minerva now, she can have her own lesson plan prepared for break...”

“...the only good time for her, I’m afraid...”

“...Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday...”

“...ideally, Sunday, as well...”

He looked between them, watching as Snape and Pomfrey ironed out a class schedule. Dazai watched, bewildered, as the entire plan seemed to cement itself around him—*and without him.*

They could probably meet at the same time. Maybe for longer hours, or for more days. Minerva’s own break schedule would need to be figured out, of course. She was the keystone piece in all of this. She’d need time to learn Dazai’s casting style, then figure out what he was doing wrong. Maybe consult a few books on the subject. Or find her own half-forgotten spell Dazai could practice on. Then assuming everyone was amenable—

“I’m going home for break,” Dazai finally cut in.

Pomfrey and Snape’s conversation ground to a dead-halt.

The traction of their growing plan skidded and stumbled until all that remained was two stupefied faces and Dazai’s own plain interjection.

When they just kept staring, Dazai cleared his throat to continue.

“I already bought a plane ticket and everything,” he said. “There’s no way Mori will let me stay here just to learn one stupid spell. If it’s such a big deal, just recommend me a book and I’ll read it over the holiday.”

Snape's brows furrowed, suddenly his entire mien filled with tension. There was an odd emotion in his eyes—one Dazai recognized from when Snape decided to poke around too much. It immediately had Dazai on edge. He needed to shut that down *fast.*

Lucky for Dazai, he had the perfect distraction all lined up and ready to go.

"...You're going home."

"I'm sure I can figure the spell out on my own. No need to sound so anxious, *Severus,"* Dazai deflected, smilingly. The name rolled smoothly off his tongue like it belonged there. Sweet like honey in tea.

"You—What—" Snape stop-started. Tension morphed into befuddlement in a split-second twitch of his face. He skipped straight past worried, annoyed, enraged—and right into utterly baffled. *"What did you just call me?"*

"Hm? I don't know what you mean, Sir."

Snape's lips pressed into a thin line. A second later, his entire face bloomed red with blood.

Rage.

His shoulders shook—Dazai recognized the motion of someone about to snap. Father wore that look during his fits.

Dazai was already prepared for the strike this time. He wouldn't be caught off-guard by Snape reaching forward like he had in the past. It was different, like this. Laying the trap, then waiting for retaliation.

Predictable.

Only scary if he wanted it to be.

Shoulders stiff as a cemetery stone and smile just as stabbing, Dazai waited for the inevitable explosion.

Snape drew in a breath and—

And—!

Then let it out slowly.

"Detention," he said, carefully biting out the word like it held any kind of weight. "For a week. I won't tolerate that level of disrespect. You will call me *Professor Snape,* and nothing else, brat."

Dazai stared. He blinked several times, as if that would clear his vision up—because there was no *way* Snape was just going to take a deep breath and move on.

Or... maybe there was?

Because Snape only scowled at him from across the desk.

And. Okay. Maybe Dazai should have expected that. Snape was the type of person to bark and spit, but he'd never *really* lashed out before, had he? Still...

"That's it?"

Snape sighed and pinched his brow. "Two weeks detention, then."

"Ah..." Dazai shifted in his seat. "That's not what I meant."

"I know it's not," Snape muttered under his breath. Dazai had to strain to hear him. Then, "Shall I make it *three weeks*, Mr. Dazai?"

At his side, Pomfrey had gone quiet, and her lips were pursed with displeasure. When she saw Dazai glancing at her, she shook an uncertain smile loose. "Let's not make any more trouble now, you two."

Snape shot her a look. *"'You two'?"* he echoed, annoyed. "Who's the one making trouble here, again?"

Dazai stared between them.

His deflection had... kind of worked.

But in an attempt to avoid Snape's pesky habit of prying into his home life, he'd only come face-to-face with this new weird, passive version of his potion's professor. Someone who let things slide and was apparently only easy to manipulate in certain directions.

Strange! Snape was predictable up until the point that he wasn't.

Dazai didn't know if he should feel interested or threatened.

While Pomfrey and Snape were briefly distracted, Dazai quietly gathered his belongings. He wouldn't be able to make a silent escape, but the sooner he moved, the less time he'd have to spend here. All his moving around must have caught their attention, though.

"You know... no student is required to return home over winter break." Snape froze Dazai in place with a slowly raised hand. "Even if their guardian requests it."

Dazai made a show of continuing to gather his things, clearly not enthused with Snape's continued questioning. "That's sounds like kidnapping," he said.

"What?" Pomfrey startled.

Snape let out another breath. Steadying himself, maybe. He wore a particularly serious expression that Dazai had found himself learning to hate more and more as the year went on. "Students enrolled at Hogwarts are placed temporarily in the school's care. That contract is only repealed once the second semester ends."

Dazai tilted his head.

Really? And Mori had still signed him off for this mission? Dazai wouldn't have thought the doctor could handle having his things legally belong to someone else.

But Mori had always been someone for risky gambles when the payoff was grand enough. Dazai shouldn't be so surprised on that front.

Although... "Does that make you my guardian, right now?" He asked.

Snape made a face at that, and Pomfrey answered for him. "In a sense, yes. Every staff member at Hogwarts is currently your legal guardian."

"Then I should be able to call you Severus if I want! You know, we're basically family until May."

"You'll be in *detention* until May, brat."

"More time to spend together, Severus! Aren't we a lucky family!"

"You—!"

Abruptly, Pomfrey shot to her feet.

Dazai and Snape immediately snapped to attention.

"What *Mr. Snape* intends to say is," she began harshly. Only once it became clear they were done fighting did her tone drop into its usual honeyed cadence. She slowly lowered herself back down. "It is no one's choice but your own where you spend your break."

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" Dazai mumbled into his chest.

Because really—*twice in one day?*

Sure, he was pretty open about disliking Mori, but that was hardly cause for everyone to jump on him about staying on campus! And while sticking it to Mori was always fun, he couldn't just up-and abandon this job. Not when it was the Port Mafia's will. And certainly not when there were so many moving parts.

First Blaise. Now this.

Were his emotions really so plainly written across his face?

Had he been slipping without noticing? Become something that's easy to read?

Maybe Mori was right.

Maybe Hogwarts *was* making him soft.

Something blistered in Dazai's chest. To spite the feeling, he drew a blank frown over his face.

“I’m going home for break,” Dazai repeated, this time more firmly. No room for argument. “There’s no choice to consider.”

“Mr. Dazai. I need you to think this through properly,” Snape argued.

Dazai *leveled* him with a tired stare.

“I’ve given it plenty of thought. You just like making problems where there aren’t any.”

Snape clicked his tongue—clearly irritated, but as always holding back from doing anything about it.

Instead, they repeated the same waltzing steps they always danced: Snape sniffed out something he deemed worrisome, Dazai told him to mind his own business. Snape lied. Dazai lied. Then they revolved around to bickering again.

After a second, Snape’s hand fell to the drawer of his desk.

Grabbing the tea, undoubtedly. It was his favorite thing to reach for before starting a bothersome conversation. Dazai waited for the tell-tale *clink* of his mugs on the desk, a complaint about honey already prepped on his tongue. Though a warm cup did sound nice right now. And it was always nice to give his hands something to distract themselves with.

Snape set a charred sheet of paper on the desk.

Dazai blinked.

Huh?

“What’s this?” The question slipped out before he could stall his curiosity. He leaned forward in his seat, annoyances momentarily forgotten upon being caught so off guard. No tea kettle in sight. No familiar snake-skin mug chasing after it.

The folded piece of paper wasn’t magic—Dazai could tell. But something about it still struck him as... odd. It churned in his guts, a realization yet unrealized. The fold of the paper was brochure style: divided into three. The paper would have looked expensive if it weren’t for how it had clearly been burnt to bits. Dazai couldn’t see anything written on it from his seat, but that didn’t mean it was blank. For Snape to be showing it like this, it must have said something interesting. Interesting and relevant. *Hm...*

These observations ran through Dazai’s mind in an instant.

Such that by the time Snape even opened his mouth to answer Dazai’s questions, the mafioso had already realized the paper’s origins.

The feeling bubbling in his stomach was undoubtedly something like dread.

“Explain this to me,” Snape said, tapping a finger against the letter. “If you can do that, I’ll permit you to return home.”

Dazai stared.

Pomfrey did the same—expression surprised. Maybe more than Dazai's own, which he had shuttered closed into something empty once again.

She recognized the letter, but hadn't expected Snape to mention it, then. Dazai looked between them, hoping to find some weakness there worth exploiting.

"...Let me read it, first," Dazai said slowly. Snape looked ready to argue again. "I can hardly tell you which letter that is without at least skimming it first."

Snape's expression darkened as if Dazai's request had decided something foul for him. "You recognize it, then."

"I recognize Mori's fancy paper."

Snape grunted. Then, he pushed the letter across the desk.

Dazai took it without a word, unfolding the tri-fold to skim its contents. There wasn't much. Most of the letter had been burnt away—likely a remnant from Egg's early exploits. Probably, Snape had plucked it out of some pile of ash, somewhere. Lucky for Dazai, the letter wasn't particularly damning. A few lines of Mori being his typical annoying self, was really all. No reference to the Philosopher's Stone. Nor any mention of the Port Mafia and its ongoing scheme.

Nothing critical had been leaked, but the tight band of pressure around his chest constricted all the same.

"After all I've given you, it would be such a bother for you to fail me now," Mori had written. Dazai remembered it without having to read it again, but he let his eyes bathe in the curving, black ink anyway. *"You won't be returning home if you don't do this, understand? Not in one piece, at least, and that wouldn't be cute at all."*

Finished reading, Dazai took a silent moment to look up at Snape and Pomfrey.

They both appeared as serious as ever. For once, even Pomfrey's everlasting warmth was replaced with a severe frown and tense shoulders. They were looking at one another. Evidently, they were having some kind of silent communication. Whatever it was, they lacked the same finesse Fred and George had. A second later, Pomfrey turned back to her notes and silently re-opened them.

Dazai glanced back to the letter.

Had he really just left this lying around for anyone to take?

He was beyond lucky all the important bits had burnt away (Dazai made a mental note to feed Egg something expensive and bloody, later).

It was sloppy, leaving this behind. Dazai didn't do sloppy. He was all clean, efficient work and careful pre-planning. He wasn't... *a heart-on-his-sleeve, evidence leaving fool!*

What was it Mori said at the start of the semester? I'm not acting like a mafioso.

Dazai set the letter on his lap.

His eyes fell to the swooping *M.* underlining the page. Then he pinched the skin of his wrist until it turned cherry red. It burned.

"Mr. Dazai..."

Right. Everyone here was annoying about that particular habit.

Dazai silently redirected his hand to the front pocket of his cloak. He withdrew the sickle he'd stashed there earlier. Then, with nimble fingers, he danced it across his knuckles. The coin flipped onto the back of his hand, then into his open palm. A flash of Dazai's fingers had the coin vanish from view. One second and a flick of his wrist later, the coin was in his palm again. Repeat.

Snape and Pomfrey followed the ostentatious coin tricks with wide eyes. Based on their expressions, Dazai wasn't sure they were really following the sleight-of-hand. Quick fingers made for confusing work. Dazai liked it that way.

Brows pinched, it took Snape nearly a minute before he seemed to realize Dazai was only keeping his hands busy, and not attempting some kind of bribe. He cleared his throat.

"This letter," he said, "it was written by Mori?"

"Yep," Dazai said, popping the *p* loudly.

Snape's lip twitched. "And yet, he makes reference to someone *else* being your father."

Dazai rested his head to one side. "I'm adopted."

Snape hummed, as though he'd already suspected something along those lines. He was still too calm—starting with the easy questions and working up, then...

Dazai tossed the coin. It spun several times before catching in his open hand. "He's annoying about it. And so is my father." He didn't have to fake the irritation in his voice. The whole situation with Mori treating Father's waning health was a cluster. Dazai was unfortunately stuck smack in the middle of it. In truth, he didn't like either of them. Dazai would rather be left well alone. "Next."

"We have quite a few concerns, dear," Pomfrey gentled. "How about you explain everything to us, and we'll work from there?"

Sitting upright, Dazai considered her request.

"Aren't you going to at least make tea first?" He asked Snape.

"Explain the letter."

“Right, right...”

Dazai puffed. Snape was really insistent today, *hm?*

“There’s not much to say.” Dazai snapped his fingers, and the coin jumped into his other hand. “Mori was being annoying, as always.” *Snap.* “We wrote back-and-forth all last year, but he never managed to write a letter that wasn’t completely insufferable.” *Snap.* “You know. You’ve met him.”

Snape shifted at that, an odd expression on his face. “Briefly,” he said. “Your fath— *guardian’s* behavior wasn’t exactly my main priority, back then. I seem to recall a cheeky brat taking up all my attention at the time.”

“You’re a teacher, shouldn’t you be better at multitasking?”

Pomfrey cleared her throat pointedly.

“Whatever. You didn’t miss much, other than Mori being his usual slimy self. If I had the luxury of ignoring him too, I would,” Dazai said, sounding almost wistful.

“Slimy...” Pomfrey mouthed. “Mr. Dazai, can you explain that?”

“Of; relating to; or resembling slime.”

Pomfrey’s brows pinched in confusion, but beside her, Snape merely sighed.

“Don’t just echo the *dictionary* at us, Problem Child,” he breathed. “Explanations. Examples. Here—” Snape poked a finger down on the letter, stabbing out a particularly sentence like it had wronged him. “What does this mean?”

Dazai leaned forward to read it. Mori had written him,

“It’s a bit too large for Elise, but that’s what I have you for. You always have looked adorable in white. You’re not pure like that at all.”

“Exactly what it sounds like,” Dazai grumbled. Even just reading over it now, Dazai could feel the drag on soft fabrics over his skin. White lace and frilly hems. A collared neck and a petticoat. Dazai didn’t actually mind wearing more feminine clothes. He just didn’t like when it was Mori doing the dressing. Really, Mori had soured the whole thing for him. “The dress was too big for Elise, so he wanted me to wear it.”

“The... dress...” Snape trailed off, seemingly unsure of what to make of that. He glanced to Pomfrey, whose expression was oddly serious.

“Don’t get weird about that part,” Dazai sniffed. “I’ll wear whatever I like.”

“That’s not what I—” Snape stopped himself. He drew in a labored breath. “Sorry.”

“Making you wear this dress... is one of those *slimy* things Mori does?” Pomfrey asked. Her voice was careful like it was treading a thin edge. Like she was talking to a *child.* Dazai

didn't like that one bit. When people talked slow and intentional like that, it meant they had something they wanted to say. Something they weren't sure *how* to say.

And he wasn't a child. Not really.

Now it was Dazai's turn to make a face. "He just goes shopping with Elise too much," he said, just as careful as Pomfrey had. "I don't mind."

He did. But that was beside the point.

Pomfrey smiled indulgently—but also somewhat guiltily. Clearly, she didn't really believe he was unbothered. Though Dazai wasn't clear, exactly, on what she was so hung up on. Sure, Mori was a creep. But that was old news.

"That last comment—" Pomfrey gently prodded.

"About *purity?"* Dazai asked. He tasted the word around his tongue like he'd eaten one of Fred's joke candies—the ones that burst into garbage flavors rather than cherry or honey or whatever else was actually printed on the box.

Pomfrey and Snape nodded.

"You could ask anyone about that," Dazai told them.

They shared a look.

"Explain."

Dazai flicked the coin. When he caught it, he covered it with his other hand. He made a mental guess at what it had landed on—tails—then uncovered it.

Tails.

"Well, everyone here thinks I'm evil, right? I'm the so-called Demon Student."

Pomfrey's look of blistering guilt doubled, and Snape pursed his lips tightly in response.

Dazai tossed the coin again. This time as he covered it, he gestured for Snape to call it. When his professor didn't bite, Dazai sighed and peeked at it himself. Tails again.

"Mori was only expressing a similar thought. *A demon shouldn't wear white*—something like that." Dazai paused. "He says I look better in black, you know. Lucky the school uniform is so dark, hm? It suits my figure better."

They stared at him, evidently at a loss for words.

Snape shook himself. "Your own guardian thinks that about you?"

There was something odd in his voice. Trepidation? Whatever the emotion, it had Dazai fumbling his next coin flip. He hastened to catch it.

A failed toss! Dazai took an eager stab in the dark, and called the toss as having landed heads.

A quick glance revealed his guess to be right, and he sighed.

“But this letter is from *before* Quirrell’s...” Snape trailed off, a flash of guilt suddenly in his eyes. At once, he straightened. “This isn’t a new development.”

“Course not,” Dazai said, flapping his hand around disinterestedly. He paused, then. How exactly should he explain that to Mori, being *evil* wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. In the Port Mafia, someone without morals was flexible. Wasn’t constrained by anything, except, apparently, that they wouldn’t look good in white. Eventually, he settled on a dry, “call it an inside joke.”

He wasn’t laughing, though. And neither were Pomfrey and Snape, who now both looked about seconds from being sick. Dazai wasn’t sure why. Still, he got the feeling he must have mis-stepped, somehow. Or otherwise, that those two were on a completely different page than he was.

Drat. The differences between Port Mafia life and Hogwarts life were, once again, a startling pain to reconcile.

Conversations of this nature were always easier in the Port Mafia, where *‘he thinks I’m evil’* was more of a brag than anything else. Where having the boss’ doctor’s full attention was only a bad thing if Dazai let it be one.

“Mori just knows me,” he said after a second. “How I am.”

Snape made a face like he wanted to disagree.

“...and when he says, here,” Pomfrey indicated the letter, “that you *wouldn’t be returning home in one piece, if you failed.”* She leaned away from the page. “Could you please explain that? Please—there's no judgement of you here.”

“Fail my classes and be punished,” Dazai lied. “That’s all.”

At the word *‘punished,’* Pomfrey and Snape sat at full attention. If Dazai had thought they’d been on edge before, he was instantly proven wrong twice-over. Snape’s stare was intense. Pomfrey’s only mildly less so.

“What kind of punishment.” Snape spoke, and it was not a question when he said it like that.

Dazai wracked his brains.

Because in this context, Mori had most certainly meant *“I’ll drop you on my surgical table, have a go, and I’ll decide what to do with you from there.”*

That was not the answer Snape and Pomfrey wanted—or maybe it was, but not in any way Dazai thought he might benefit from. In any case, Dazai decided it was best to soften his

answer. Something a bit less *vivisection* in nature, and a bit more... pedestrian. Something Draco's father might do. Or Ron's, or Hermione's.

Until, abruptly, Dazai realized *he didn't know.*

'He'd beat the shit out of me,' was the first thing Dazai thought of. But, thinking back, the most punishment Hogwarts had ever doled out was making him listen to Lockhart talk for an hour straight. So maybe a beating was too harsh? But that couldn't possibly be right.

Detention, then. Or—the homebound equivalent—grounding.

That was it. That was the safest answer. To successfully navigate this situation, he'd avoid any talk of violence whatsoever. The last thing Dazai needed was Snape connecting random dots between violence and Yokohama and then, inevitably, the mafia.

"Mr. Dazai?" Pomfrey asked, gentle and slow, "you can tell us."

"No harm will come to you. I promise."

Dazai frowned. He'd taken too long to answer, and the abnormal silence must have made him look scared.

He was scared, kind of. Scared that he'd been slipping as a mafioso. That the correct answer hadn't immediately popped to mind. That Mori was right about him.

"Ah... my mind wandered off," Dazai apologized, sheepish.

Pomfrey's returning smile was sad. "That's alright, dear. Do you need a minute, or..?"

He shook his head. "No. *Uh*—it's a figure of speech, *'not in one piece.'* He just means I'll regret it."

Snape gestured for him to continue. His hands were pressed flat against the table, but every so often a minute tremor ran through them.

Dazai flipped his coin, fingers precise.

Heads, just as he'd thought.

The next one would be tails, he decided.

"I didn't fail my classes, though," Dazai told them, "the headmaster let me pass, remember? I didn't get punished for that."

Tails.

The next one would be tails again. Dazai pretended to mis-judge the toss, and caught it in his left hand rather than his right.

"But Mori has... punished you. For other things?"

"Tails," Dazai muttered to himself upon spotting the coin. He tossed it again. "Sure. Speaking out of turn, stealing things from his office, screwing around while he's trying to patch me up. Things like that."

Pomfrey's eyes narrowed. "Patch you up?" She asked.

"Mori is a doctor," Dazai explained. Though, really, at least Snape already knew that much. Dazai called the next toss as heads. "Last time he was cleaning up a dog bite, I kicked him in the stomach." He indicated the spot on his arm where a feisty retriever had sunk its teeth in. "He grounded me to the kennel. I guess I was supposed to learn a lesson, but I didn't really learn anything 'cept that dogs are gross."

The coin landed heads.

Snape and Pomfrey stared, and the next flip would land the coin tails.

The truth was that Dazai was simply gifted with the feel of a coin in his palm. The weight of it, the raise on each side, the spiney ridges along its edge like a dead thing's rib cage. There was nothing random about how Dazai flipped a coin. It was too familiar to mistake. And when Dazai tossed it—how he flicked his thumb, how many times it spun—he already knew how it would land. The tails face was ever-so-slightly heavier on this particular coin, so if he flicked it just like *this*, it would always land on tails. Flip it like *that*, and it would be heads.

Dazai made a game of it. Of rigging the coin to land tails-end up, then trying to convince himself it had landed heads instead. But it always revealed exactly how he'd told it to, and never flipped itself around without his knowing. Even when he pretended to flub it, Dazai's hands wouldn't fail him. There was no such thing as *chance* in Dazai's hands.

The only splinter of fun this game offered was when he really *did* drop the coin.

"Kennel?" Snape echoed, something horrified bleeding into his words.

Dazai's brows pinched, certain he hadn't mis-stepped but still seeing that look on Snape's face as though he had. "Dogs," Dazai said, simply. "Ugly, smelly things? Bite if you look at them too long, wag their stupid tails if you smile their way?"

Snape's lips twitched, but his annoyance was muted beneath something else. Something... *boiling,* Dazai thought. "I know what a dog is, Mr. Dazai."

"Then why ask such a stupid question?"

Snape gaped, at a loss for words.

Dazai glanced to Pomfrey and found her similarly frozen, hand stalled over her notes.

He tossed the coin heads, and it landed just that a second later.

"And Mori..." Snape trailed away. "...often..?"

"I'm very well behaved," Dazai said by way of answer.

They didn't look convinced—but not in the usual way that had Dazai hiding a cheeky smile. More like they had learned something unsavory.

Like they were about to throw up.

It was odd, but mostly annoying. Because Dazai had hedged his responses in such a way to *avoid* that kind of reaction. Though, he supposed, no one was jumping across the table to grab at him, so this could have gone much worse.

"Is that all?" Dazai asked. He didn't wait for answer, deciding in that second both that *yes, they were done,* and also that his next coin flip would land tails. "I'll check a book out on transfiguration for over break. And when I come back, McGonagall can tell me all the things I'm doing wrong."

Dazai stood then. He ignored their protests, muted as they were, and showed himself out of Snape's office.

People were such a hassle, he thought. Always trying to make mountains out of molehills!

But for all his exasperation, Dazai's stomach was tied up in sick-feeling knots. His hand was steady—his control of the coin exact as always. But...

But he'd left that letter behind when he should have left a gaping hole in his wake. Something *had* changed about him, hadn't it? Something sentimental and careless.

Mori's words echoed in his head.

Dazai flipped the sickle tails, but tucked it in his pocket without checking.

-

Later that night, alone in the office, Dazai finally pulled Ginny's diary back out. It seemed to glow in the harsh moonlight. The shatter of light filtered through stained-glass made the book look like it had been ripped apart in a fit of rage.

He turned open the cover.

The greeting he'd written that afternoon was gone, now. The page was blank in its wake. It was like he'd never put a quill to it in the first place.

Except for the bottom of the page.

What was once empty was now stained with ink darker than the darkest of shadows. It still looked wet like it was only just written. But a touch revealed it to be dry. No quill had written

this. The words were as much a part of the diary as the broken spine was.

A reply.

The diary had responded. It was charmed—or it was *alive.*

Egg made an asking sound from Dazai's shoulder.

Printed in curling, black script, the diary had written back:

'I would hardly call this a home.'

Chapter End Notes

thanks soooo much for reading! :) happy birthday!

next up: the train ride home for winter break.

EDIT: no update this week (24-01-17)! i'm taking a little break from writing/uploading :) happy birthday to everyone in the meantime!
EDIT: There will be no update this week (24-01-24). Please do not spam the comment section : (I hope everyone has a good week.

A Dragon, a Delinquent, and a Diary

Chapter Summary

A series of shenanigans occurring on the train ride home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

'My name is Tom Riddle. May I ask who you are? Tell me, how did you come in contact with this diary?"

'I got you from a friend.'

'That's lovely... and your name would be?'

-

Dazai breathed into his scarf. A plume of white air clouded up around his face, warm where it left his lungs and freezing once it touched the air. He cupped his hands together and scowled into them.

"You look deep in thought."

Dazai glanced away from the Hogwarts' train. Snow was starting to gather on top.

Blaise was watching him from a few feet off, Draco standing stiff as ice at his other side. "Should I be concerned?"

Dazai puffed out another cloud. "It's cold," he grumbled.

"It *is* December," Draco clipped in. He had his hands shoved into his pockets, and a shivering tremor shook his entire body. He was also standing about a foot too far from the rest of their group to really be a part of their group—trying to look separate from them while still holding a conversation. Dazai strained to hear him. "Still, they can start boarding already, can't they? We've been waiting for at least five minutes already! People don't make me wait for them."

"It's been less than a minute," Blaise said.

"I guess Draco is the impatient type... though if we aren't allowed on soon, I'll just freeze to death. That's not an awful way to go, right?"

Hermione elbowed him, and Dazai staggered to the side in a few stumbling steps. “Don’t joke about that.”

“It’s not a joke! My nose is about to fall off!”

“That’s not possible—!”

Blaise cleared his throat. “They’re boarding now.”

Hermione and Dazai jolted to attention.

Sure enough, the train doors were now open. The other students—who had before given Dazai’s group a wide berth—were now quickly hurrying inside. It was cold enough to freeze out here! Dazai would be sprinting in a step behind them, if he thought he could do as much without starting a stampede of some kind. The screaming would just hurt his ears. Beside that, he was carrying precious cargo.

Dazai fixed the heavy bag slung over his shoulder. It squirmed.

“Let’s head in,” Draco said, though most of the crowd had yet to clear. “I’ll get us a compartment.”

“Lead the way then, Mr. Respected-Leader-of-Slytherin!”

Draco shot him a questioning glance over his shoulder before leading them up the step and into the train. As expected, people parted nervously around them—whether from respect for Draco or fear of Dazai was anyone’s guess.

Everyone slumped with relief the second they were onboard. Warmth oozed around them, melting their frozen bones and drying their running noses. Dazai let out a breath of satisfaction, and wasn’t met with any responding plume of white air.

“This way,” Draco said, tearing the group from their collective reverie. “I want to chase those Hufflepuffs out before they get settled in.”

Dazai followed Draco’s gaze to the compartment next over, where two Hufflepuff first-years were sliding their suitcases beneath the seats. They were smiling and giggling with one another. Evidently, they hadn’t noticed the oncoming Malfoy Storm currently thundering their way.

Draco stomped up to the door. He crossed his arms over his chest, and when they finally looked at him, he snapped, “Out.”

“I... but we..?”

“Out.”

The Hufflepuffs squeaked and hastily began to regather their things. They were rushing out the door within the next few seconds. Dazai smiled politely at them as they left, and they practically sprinted down the corridor.

Draco took a seat by the door. “Sit,” he told them. “Before someone realizes you’re with me.”

Hermione hovered awkwardly at the door for a second before complying. She took the seat across from Draco.

“You don’t have to order *us,* Draco,” Dazai said, amused, and took the seat beside Hermione.

Blaise sat a second later.

Without further affair, Draco shut the door. “It’s the only way I can be sure you’ll listen.”

Dazai pouted. “That’s not true at all!”

“You’re right. You never listen, no matter what tone of voice I use.”

“Well...”

“That’s what I thought.”

They stared at each other for a second, then Draco snorted out a laugh. Dazai grinned.

Then, without further ado, Dazai plopped his bag onto his lap. It wasn’t his bag—rather, it was Luna’s. Her too-large bag seemed to stretch to impossible lengths, and was exactly what Dazai needed for today’s exploits. Luna had given it to him without any fuss. Evidently, Luna was more than pleased to help an *'exorcist in need.'* And Dazai was too grateful for the generosity to correct her.

The bag shook and wiggled. A small plume of smoke curled out from where the flap was a little undone.

“Hey, Hermione. Do you know any spells to lock that door?”

“Of course I do!” She preened, and cast it in the same breath. The door *clicked* shut. But just as soon as her satisfaction with the spell came, it was gone. She whirled a disapproving glare onto Dazai. “I can’t *believe* you’re actually smuggling her out of Hogwarts. We’re going to get caught. I’ll get a *suspension!”*

Dazai unzipped the bag. A second later, the spiny black head of a dragon poked out. “For what, sitting near Egg? She needs some space to grow. Anyway, Draco did the same thing last year!”

“Don’t drag me into this,” Draco objected. “Not again.”

Egg popped out of the bag, eyes eagerly hunting around the new environment. She scrabbled excitedly against the bag. Then, with a great flap, shot into the sky. The compartment was too small for her to really get going, but she made a good show of circling over their heads.

Dazai watched her for a moment before turning his focus to the window.

The ground was covered in snow, now. A thin layer of white flakes—it would at least a foot deep by the end of the day. Dazai wasn't exactly eager to go home per se... but he had to admit he was glad to be avoiding all the snowed-in days this year. He'd gotten a cold last time. This winter break, he could probably scrape by with only a few cuts and bruises. Less, if he did a good job shutting up and staying out of Father's way.

The train kicked to life below them. It rumbled warmly underfoot, and was shortly chugging away from the station. Dazai watched as, slowly, Hogwarts and its surrounding forests became a tiny spire in the distance. He kept staring long after it was gone.

"—Dazai?"

Dazai blinked. *"Hm?"*

Blaise was watching him. Actually, they all were.

"What is it?"

"You're zoning out," Blaise told him, jaw square and gnawing in thought. "We were just talking about our plans over break. Hermione asked what you were going to be doing."

Dazai sniffed. *"Oh,* you know. Lying in bed. Pestering Mori. Doing some reading for class."

Hermione perked up. "I thought you'd read all the books?" She asked. Then, she let out an elated gasp. "Don't tell me! You're really going to start doing your homework?! Dazai!"

"What? Of course not. Hermione, don't be silly."

Hermione sputtered, face going red with either embarrassment or anger.

Dazai laughed at the expression. He turned to Draco, who was watching them with thinned eyes. "If only I could crash Draco's stuffy party instead. Blaise will be there too, right?"

"Sure," Blaise said, gesturing lazily with one hand. A second later, Egg tried to snap at it. Blaise dropped his hand quickly after that. "I don't think you'd like it much, though. Malfoy parties are crowded and loud."

Draco nodded stiffy—like he didn't want to be seen agreeing with that sentiment, but also couldn't bring himself to disagree with it.

Blaise continued. "The real fun is after we sneak away."

Draco jerked in his direction. "Don't say that so loud."

"It's not exactly a secret that the Slytherin kids always disappear half-way through every Malfoy party, Draco."

"Still. You don't have to make it sound like I'm just dying to escape social niceties. It's a socialite's duty, to commune with the people. Even if it is terribly tedious."

Blaise shrugged, clearly nonplussed.

Dazai leaned forward on his elbows. “So Draco is a bad boy after all, *hm?* Running away from your own parties to hang out with friends.”

Draco flushed head-to-toe. “Dazai!”

“What?” Dazai flapped a hand. Unlike with Blaise, Egg wouldn’t dare to bite at him. “Don’t scold me for your own delinquent behavior.”

“Don’t call me a *bad boy!”* He hissed, voice warbling and frantic with embarrassment. “It’s demeaning, for a Malfoy.”

“It’s true, though! You’re Slytherin’s resident bad boy!”

“That’s you!”

Dazai leaned forward, trapping his chin between his palms. He smiled churlishly. “There’s no need to protest so loud, Draco. You’re choosing to sit with us instead of someone like Pansy. That makes you a bad boy for sure.”

Draco gawped. His face was an impressive shade of red. “That’s not—Blaise! Back me up!”

“I’m glad you’re sitting with us,” Blaise said.

That only made Draco more flustered. He gaped between them for a desperate moment before plastering a scowl across his face. He crossed his arms—or tried to. Before he could complete the *'I’m totally fed up with you lot'* look, Egg crash-landed into his chest. Draco had to scramble to catch her.

Egg made a chirping noise.

Dazai laughed. A second later, Hermione giggled as well.

Hermione turned a fond smile onto him, then. “You seem in high spirits,” she commented.

Dazai blinked. *“Huh?* Do I?”

“I think so,” she said. “Lately, with everything going on... I’ve been worried about you. More than usual, I mean.”

Blaise and Draco shared a glance.

“Fred and George say you’ve been more distant, lately. And I can’t help but worry, with everyone picking on you...”

“I don’t mind,” Dazai said, interjecting before Hermione could pick up too much steam. “All the attention. If anything, it’s keeping me busy.”

Hermione made a face like she didn’t believe him.

Which was fair, really, because Dazai didn't exactly hide his dislike of crowds. But the whole Daily Prophet situation had really forced his hand. As things stood, Dazai was choosing to pick his battles.

So what if everyone at Hogwarts hated his guts?

Lucius' test was complete. So there!

At the very least, Mori would be pleased with him.

Dazai shifted upright. "Anyway, I spend practically all day in the office. How are the twins possibly feeling neglected?"

Hermione's mouth snapped shut at that, a sheepish expression crossing her face.

Dazai nodded in mute agreement. "I never know what those two are thinking, either. Those two can be real enigmas, when they want to be... I think it has something to do with their twin telepathy."

Draco sputtered. "Their *what?"*

"Anyway," Dazai said, "Hermione, I'm supposed to figure out transfiguration over break. Snape said. And if I can't figure it before January, I'll really just die! Do you have any tips?"

Immediately, she perked up.

And before anyone could get a word in edgewise, Hermione barreled into an incredibly long and terribly well-thought-out lecture about the basics of transfiguration. Dazai knew most of it already—though a few notes were new to him. She was wide and gesturing. In a quick wave, she swiped a textbook from her bag and flipped it open to a diagram. She showed him a complicated-looking matrix. Told him about chemical reactions that Dazai knew had nothing to do with actually casting a spell. Drew a shape in the air, and flicked her wand, and pretended to turn Draco's head into a weasel's.

Transfiguration was still stupid. Hermione made it a little bearable.

Ice had frosted over the window, and it was cold even here.

Dazai squeezed into his coat to hide from the chill.

-

"—and that's why you *flick* your wand before *swishing* it when transfiguring buttons!"

Dazai stared.

"That's awfully nitpicky."

At some point during the lecture, Blaise had drifted off to sleep.

“Of course it is! Transfiguration is especially complex! A *swish* instead of a *flick* could set your button on fire!”

“...just use *incendio* for that.”

“Dazai!”

“I’m kidding,” Dazai pursed his lips. *“Ah...* I’ll just give up on transfiguration. This sounds like too much. What’s the point of it, anyway? Who wants to turn a button into a beetle?”

Hermione’s cheeks puffed out. “It's *beetle* into *button*. And that’s a basic spell. For practicing the essentials before moving onto higher level—”

“Like what? *Match to needle?* Just buy needles at the store instead of matches. Honestly...”

“Wha—!”

“Merlin, you two can bicker.”

Hermione and Dazai immediately ceased their chattering.

Draco was watching them with dull eyes. “I’m starting to think that’s Dazai’s real power: starting fights.”

“It’s *‘being annoying,’* actually,” Dazai grinned, cheeky.

Draco rolled his eyes. He pet along the ridge of Egg’s back, who preened happily at the attention. “I’ll believe that,” he said. “Anyway, surely you’ve figured out transfiguration after that lecture. It’s been hours.”

Dazai made a so-so gesture with his hand, and Hermione made a noise of displeasure at his side.

“It’s not like that,” he said to Hermione’s pout. “Transfiguration is just different,” he shrugged. “Somehow. I don’t know.”

Hermione made a face. “Really? I wouldn’t think so.”

Dazai wouldn’t have, either. Yet here they were.

Maybe some more research would prove useful. He *did* promise Snape he’d read up on transfiguration over break. And he would. Unfortunately, practicing spells off-campus was forbidden. Regardless—

Bang!

Dazai jumped.

Draco and Hermione did the same, and Blaise startled out of his nap with a squeak.

Dazai glanced around the room. “Was that..?”

“The door?” Draco put a calming hand on Egg, but the dragon wasn’t mollified in the slightest. She growled and stood.

“Someone is trying to get in?”

“Probably just the lady selling candies.”

“Or,” Dazai said, squinting at the door. Mercifully, it was still locked from Hermione’s spell. “Someone else.”

The door rattled again—someone was clearly trying to get in. *Angrily* trying to get in, if the forceful shoving and yanking was anything to go by.

Meanwhile, Egg was growing more and more distressed by the second. Draco’s hand stilled her—for the most part. But a startled dragon was still a *dragon*. And by the fifth *bang!* of the door, she had shot into the air again and was anxiously circling around.

“Any ideas—*oh.”*

Blaise turned to him. *“’Oh.’* What’s that?”

Dazai grimaced. The feeling of magic pricked against his skin. “It’s a ‘someone just cast a spell on the door’ *oh.”*

“An unlocking charm!” Hermione and Draco realized at the same time.

Which was all well and good, except for—

Three things happened in very quick succession.

First: Pansy swung the door open with enough force that Dazai briefly thought a gun had shot off somewhere.

Second: Egg blasted out the door.

Third: Pansy *screamed.*

Dazai launched to his feet at once. The others were only half a second behind.

“Wh—what the devil was that!?” Pansy screeched, hands flying protectively covering her head. "Was that a blasted *dragon?!"*

“It was a Bat!” Dazai yelled.

“It was a fire salamander!” Blaise said.

Pansy stared at them, appalled. “You’re insane!”

She jerked around to find the massive, black blur that had just bolted past her.

But Egg was gone. *Long gone.* Shot off into the far corners of the Hogwarts' train, and only findable now by the—

Someone several compartments down screamed.

—by the sound of horrified children.

Right. Fantastic.

His dragon was loose. Again.

And somehow, that still wasn't Dazai's biggest problem, because Pansy was now glaring daggers into him like she might actually kill him with a stare alone.

"What are you doing?" She asked. "What have you all gotten Draco involved with now?"

Draco balked. "Wha—don't just say my name so loud! You—*ugh*, get in here!"

Draco hooked Pansy's cloak with one hand and dragged her inside the compartment. She yelped.

It was immediately a very tight squeeze. Hermione stumbled back into Dazai, who then fell against the window. It was freezing against his back. He jerked away from it and stepped on Blaise's toes.

"I don't need anyone seeing me sitting with this lot!" Draco whispered harshly.

Pansy tore herself free from Draco. But she didn't argue, so she must have seen some value in what Draco said, regardless. When she looked around the compartment to see not only Dazai, but also Hermione, she paled like she was going to be sick.

"Might be too late for that, Draco."

Draco balked. "What? Why?"

Dazai lifted his chin towards the door.

Standing just outside the entryway, a rattled looking Millie and Tracey were watching their interaction with wide eyes.

"Wh—get them in here too, then!"

"There's no room, Draco."

"Are you trying to crush us to death? That's too painful!"

"You all are—*hey, watch the elbow!"*

"Watch it!"

"Ouch!"

“Hey!”

Then—

Tweeee—eeh!!

Everyone jumped to cover their ears, as a pitchy whistle suddenly tore through the air.

Dazai winced away from Hermione and into Blaise’s chest.

Blaise wrapped two steadying arms around his waist.

“Ow,” Pansy groaned. She whirled on Hermione. “What in Merlin’s name are you doing!?”

The screeching whistle still echoed in their compartment. Hermione held her fingers to her mouth like she might just whistle again, if everyone didn’t start behaving immediately.

Dazai smiled placatingly, though he was sure this whole racket would be more easily solved if Pansy just walked away.

She didn’t.

Tracey and Millie shuffled at the door. They looked somehow both horrified, bewildered, and devastatingly angry at once. It didn’t make for a pretty picture. Dazai wondered if he could at least kick *them* out, if not Pansy.

Hermione dropped her hand from her mouth. She leveled Pansy with a stubborn frown. “Shutting the lot of you up,” she puffed angrily. She started to put her hands on her hips, nailed Draco in the side with an elbow, then dropped them back to her side ineffectually. *“Er* —sorry, Draco.”

He shot her a glare.

“What part of don’t say my name—”

“Well, why not? We’re all friends, aren’t we?” Hermione huffed.

“Draco is not friends with this demon,” Pansy countered immediately.

Dazai raised his hands innocently, as if to say, *‘who, me?’*

He was staying out of this—and it was perhaps Dazai’s first instance of self-restraint he’d used in a long time, because meddling and teasing usually came so eagerly to him. Dazai’s go-to method with Pansy was making her angry, but she already *was* angry. And he had more important things to do right now than getting punched in the face again.

His jaw twinged at the memory.

“And I won’t have anyone thinking he is.” Pansy whirled on Draco. “Come on, Draco! You’ll sit with me. It’s better company. And the Malfoy name could benefit from some of that.”

“He can sit with whoever he wants,” Hermione countered, apparently deciding this was the hill she was going to die on. Then, “And he’s sitting with his *real* friends.”

“He’s sitting with a mudblood, a demon, and poor manipulated Blaise. Draco clearly doesn’t know what he wants.”

Draco gaped, and Hermione let out an offended squeak.

“Pansy,” Draco said slowly, warning. “We’ve talked about this.”

Dazai raised a brow at that, asking, but Pansy seemed to know exactly which conversation Draco was referring to.

She cast him a severe-looking glance. Then, with a voice like she was damned to something, she told Draco, “Your father is going to be there. At the station. To pick you up.”

Draco balked.

Hermione shot him an asking look.

“My mother told me—she's planning to bother him over some favor when we arrive,” Pansy continued. She leaned in close enough for Dazai to feel her breath. It was cold and shaking. She whispered, *“You can sit with whoever you want, if that’s... if that’s what makes you happy, Draco. But I can’t let you walk out of here with him where your father can see.”*

Draco stared.

Dazai stared, as well. Who knew Pansy had a heart?

I did, Dazai thought bitterly. The word *jealous* was not an unfamiliar one, for their interactions. Pansy had a heart that only beat for Draco and Blaise, and pumped righteous anger at everyone else.

“He’s picking me up himself? Draco asked, apparently still processing. “I thought he’d send a servant.”

“Does it matter? I’ve been looking for you for the last hour. Come sit with me.”

Hermione cut in. “You can’t just drag him around wherever you please.”

“Does it look like I was talking to you, mudblood?”

“Excuse me—!”

Blaise cleared his throat.

Dazai, basically wrapped up in Blaise’s hug, had to twist his neck around to see his friend’s face. Blaise was watching the proceedings with the same expression an adult might give a toddler struggling to fit together a four-piece puzzle. Like the solution was so elementary to him, he could barely understand what the use of this conversation even was.

“I think,” he said slowly, disparagingly, “you’re all forgetting something rather important.”

Everyone stared at him. Pansy’s brow twitched in blatant annoyance.

“There’s a—”

“Fire Bat Salamander.” Dazai wriggled in Blaise’s arms.

“—suspicious creature on the loose,” Blaise barely glanced down at him. “We should catch it.”

Instantly, Hermione and Draco sobered up.

Pansy, however, did not.

“That is not a real creature,” she glowered.

“What was it?” Tracey asked suddenly.

“Why was it in here?” Millicent asked a second later. *“Er*—not that we want answers from the likes of you!”

Pansy turned on her posse, snarling. “We *do* want answers from them. We want answers, so we can turn them in for... for... whatever is it their dragging my Draco into!”

“Your Draco?” Dazai echoed snottily.

“Well, he’s not *yours.”*

“Says who—”

“Oi! That’s enough, you two! Honestly.” Hermione poked a finger into Pansy’s chest, who responded with an affronted gasp. “I understand you don’t like Dazai, but that has nothing to do with how Draco feels about him. If you care about him so much, you should support his decisions.”

Draco bristled. “I can fight my own battles, Hermione.”

Pansy looked between them. Her rage was beginning to look a little bewildered, now. Dazai didn’t think she’d ever been told off before—let alone by a *Gryffindor muggle-born.*

“And really,” Hermione continued, evidently on a roll now. “If you’re going to hate Dazai, at least do it for a good reason. Like how he doesn’t do his homework despite being incredibly smart; or how he sneaks around past curfew in clear violation of several school rules; or—”

“Let’s all try to stay focused,” Dazai cut in.

Hermione’s mouth snapped shut. A dusting of pink bloomed over her cheeks.

“There’s a monster,” he continued, “I vote we hunt it down, while Pansy and Draco here chat about their feelings.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Draco grumbled, at the same time Pansy scoffed, “as if I’d take orders from you.”

Dazai made a show of sighing. Blaise gave him a maybe reassuring pat.

“Pansy,” he breathed, “I don’t need people seeing Draco and I together any more than you do. I’m giving both of us an out, here.”

She started at that. Like she was surprised he’d given any thought to the Malfoy’s situation. But her stun was short-lived, and not a second later Pansy was scowling once more.

“Blaise, keep an eye on them. Hermione and I will investigate the monster.”

Pansy gawped. *“Wha*—you aren’t leaving, I’m chasing you out.”

Millie and Tracey shared a look.

“If that makes you feel better,” Dazai said, much to Pansy’s spitting anger. He wiggled. “Blaise..?”

“Be careful.” Blaise released Dazai from his hold. Then, quietly into Dazai’s ear, he asked, *“Second times a charm?”*

“I’m really starting to wish I hadn’t hatched this thing,” he muttered back.

The warmth of Blaise’s hug lingered for only a second longer.

And the next second, Dazai was just as cold as when he’d been standing outside.

It was a squeeze to force his way out of the cabin. Dazai inched his way clumsily through the tight quarters. Pansy set him off with a shove, while Millie and Tracey flinched away from him like he was poison. Hermione jumped.

“Oh, Dazai, wait up!”

Dazai didn’t slow his steps—the press of people on all sides uncomfortable in the way Blaise’s hug hadn’t been. But he did wait for her once he was out the door and into the more open corridor.

The hall was a mess.

There were papers and candies scattered all across the floor. Someone’s robes were torn into a ragged pile against the wall. Something was burning.

But for all the mess, the hall was empty. All the compartment doors had been hastily shut—students having likely run into them for cover. Where it was safe from the wild, shadowy beast currently haunting Hogwarts for the *second* time.

Someone’s head poked out of a nearby compartment. Dazai caught their eye, and they vanished with a squeal.

Hermione came up beside him a second later.

Just as Dazai peered back at her, Pansy slammed the door shut in his face with a snarling mien.

"...it's going to be a really tight fit in there with the door closed."

Hermione glanced at him. There was something odd in her expression—somewhere between peeved and anxious, Dazai thought. "That's all you can say?"

Dazai frowned. "We could barely manage with Millicent and Tracey half in the hallway. They're going to suffocate in there for sure."

As if in point, he wagged his arms around, showy. No one to butt into. No toes to step on.

"I mean," Hermione continued, crossing her arms defensively, "Pansy Parkinson really hates you. Really, *really* can't stand you. And unlike everyone else, she isn't afraid to do something about it. Aren't you... scared? Or angry? *I'm* angry, and she's not out for me!"

"Ah... well," Dazai sniffed. He started walking down the corridor, following the sound of a particularly distressing scream. Hermione followed him with a puffing breath. "That's Pansy, for you."

She made a face when someone screeched several doors down. "But it shouldn't be. She doesn't—no one really knows you. But they're all treating you like some kind of—"

"Monster!" Someone shrieked nearby.

Dazai and Hermione both jumped. They hastened towards the voice.

"I said it's fine, didn't I?" Dazai asked while they ran.

Hermione didn't look at him, too busy watching her step around someone's discarded suitcase. But something about her still seemed distinctly indignant. "You should be angry," she said. "Everyone hates you for no reason. I'm—*hah*—" he puffed, out of breath, "—a muggleborn. People hate me for that, sometimes. And it drives me insane!"

A Hufflepuff poked their head out the door, and Dazai had to leap to avoid smacking into them.

"I'm picking my battles," he told her.

"St—still..."

"And Draco will make whatever decision he thinks is best," Dazai continued, feeling that the words were true. Choosing between Lucius and Dazai—because it did seem to be coming down to that—was no easy trial. Or, more accurately, Draco had to choose between Lucius and himself.

Dazai could scarcely relate. His will was the Port Mafia's. Full stop.

“If he decides he’d rather please his father than hang out with us,” Dazai said, “that’s fine.”

Hermione made a face, though Dazai was unsure if she was struggling from *running* or *struggling over Draco’s conundrum.*

“I don’t think that’s fine at all,” she said, after a gasping moment.

Dazai stopped running.

Hermione squeaked. She skidded to a stop several feet ahead, then whirled around to face him. *“Wha—*what happened?”

Dazai shook his head. “Listen.”

Hermione paused.

It was silent for a second while she listened.

The train chugged quietly underneath them, and rumbled rhythmically on their feet.

“I don’t hear anything,” Hermione said after a few seconds had passed.

Dazai snapped. “Exactly,” he grinned. “No screaming.”

Understanding dawned across Hermione’s expression. An infectious smile lit her face a moment later. “Egg must have stopped flying around!” she realized. “Wait—but then how are we going to find her? We were following the sounds of students yelling, but now its gone quiet.”

Dazai hummed, thoughtful. “Well,” he said, “the last scream we heard was maybe ten rooms ahead.” He started walking again, more slowly now, towards the area he’d indicated.

Hermione followed cautiously. Her eyes skipped across the ceiling first, then along the floor. Dazai found himself doing the same. But there was no sign of Egg to be found. She must have ducked into one of the rooms—or maybe out a window?

All the compartments were tightly shut, here.

Dazai considered the situation.

“Watch my back?”

Hermione blinked. “Of course!” She said. Then, more hesitantly, she added, *“er...* what for?”

He made a so-so gesture with his hand, as if to indicate that he wouldn’t be explaining any time soon. Hermione gave him a skeptical look, but didn’t comment.

Decided, Dazai leaned back against the wall. He crossed his arms over his chest and let his eyes fall shut.

“...Dazai?”

“Just keep look-out,” he told her. “I need to focus.”

Hermione went silent after that, but not without first making a petulant huff. Dazai ignored her.

Instead, he narrowed all his focus in the magical sensations around them.

At once, the world seemed to blur out of focus. The sounds, the smells, the feel of a rumbling train against his back. Dazai pushed it all away. He searched instead for that tiny *something*. That little flicker of magic that was always buzzing around in the air.

It was always a lot, at first. How the world seemed at once to be screaming with latent magic.

But Dazai had been practicing. He’d been keeping his eyes closed through dull charms lectures, and pointless transfiguration lessons, and all through the night when he fought for each second of sleep. And soon enough, the awful burn of magic filtered out into something more usable.

There was a burst of magic off to his right.

Transfiguartion, Dazai identified. *Kids doing tricks.*

A flicker of magic two compartments down.

Aguamenti. Not what I’m looking for.

Another buzz of magic.

Levitation spell. Hm...

Dazai spread his senses further. This wasn’t what he was looking for. He didn’t want the tell-tale snap of a spell taking shape. No—he was looking for something more constant.

Dazai felt a bundle of smoky magic wriggle ahead of them.

That. *That* was what he was searching for.

His eyes shot open. “Found it—*Ah!”*

Hermione’s face was just inches from his own. Dazai jerked back, smacked into the wall, then brought his hands soothingly to his now-bruised skull.

“Sorry!” Hermione squeaked. “Sorry! I just—what were you doing?”

Dazai rubbed at his head, brushing his hair around messily in the process. “Looking for Egg,” he grumbled. “What were you doing?”

“Keeping watch,” she said, simply. “You closed your eyes. I read in the library that cutting off one of your senses can heighten the others. That’s what you were doing, right? That’s *genius*, Dazai.”

He grinned.

But stroking his own ego would have to wait until later. They still had a dragon to wrestle, after all.

“Come on. She’s just in there,” Dazai guided Hermione to the compartment four doors down to the left. When they got closer, Dazai saw that the door was partially open. He couldn’t hear anyone talking from inside. It must have been empty before Egg flew in.

He turned to Hermione, who was similarly squinting at the door.

“Hermione, you read Draco’s dragon book. Any ideas on how to calm down a panicked Norwegian Ridgeback?”

She had her lips pursed. “Run away.”

Dazai raised a brow.

“No, really! Merlin wrote that unless you already have a bond with the dragon, it’s sure to kill you.”

“She's more than welcome to try.”

Hermione leaned forward to peek into the compartment, then just as quickly pulled herself back from it. She seemed weary, but more than that, thoughtful. “Dragons are picky creatures, Dazai. And they’re illegal to own for good reason. Merlin said that only when a dragon has bonded to you—something which takes incredible trust, you know—can you be sure it won’t turn on you.”

“She won’t attack me,” Dazai said. He rocked back on his heels. “She’d die if she tried.”

“Does *she* know that?”

“Yup.”

Hermione blinked at that.

Then, she shook her head. “We aren’t killing her.”

“No,” Dazai hedged. He turned a considering glance onto Hermione. “And she didn’t bond with you, during your meetings with Draco and Ron?”

“She didn’t.” Hermione sighed. “She has with Draco, though.” Then, she raised a hand into the air, like she was cupping some invisible palm of water. “When a dragon has bonded to you, they’ll put their snout into your palm like this and shut their eyes. It’s a sign of trust—*I'm in your hands*—kind of.”

Dazai paused.

“Just like that?”

Hermione nodded.

“What, for just anyone?”

“Only for people they trust. Or think are really special.” She considered for a moment. “I guess. There are only so many dragon researchers around today. And none of them are Dragonlords like Merlin was.” She made a face. “If only Draco wasn’t stuck in with Pansy, right now...”

Hermione kept talking, oblivious to the question currently worrying a hole in Dazai’s head.

Because hadn’t Egg done that for *him?*

Admittedly, the memory was a bit foggy. Dazai had been half-asleep at the time, after all. But he was sure of it: Egg had butted into his palm right before they both went to sleep that first night in the gang office. But that couldn’t be true, because Dazai really didn’t like Egg that much. So Egg couldn’t like him in return. It was really that simple. Honest. Dazai just preferred Featherbrain. And yet...

The memory of a touch of a dragon’s nose on his palm echoed.

Dazai double-checked that he was still wearing gloves.

“—Do you think Pansy will make a fuss if we steal Draco for a few minutes?”

Dazai blinked away from his hands. “Hm?”

Hermione tutted. “You weren’t listening, were you?”

“I was thinking,” he admitted shamelessly.

She sighed. “Well, go on. I know that look. You’ve thought of something, haven’t you?”

“Sure have.” Dazai grinned sloppily.

Hermione gestured for him to continue.

Dazai confidently strode forward to Egg’s current hiding place. He grabbed the edge of the door and slid it open just enough to slip through. Then, appeasing, he told her the plan.

“I’m going to ask,” he said, “very nicely.”

Hermione choked. *“What?!”*

“Make sure no one comes in here!” Dazai said, cheery.

Hermione sputtered, and Dazai slammed the door in her face.

Then, it was silent.

Just a boy and his dragon.

Dazai didn't need to use his magical sensitivity this time. Egg was the hulking, black shadow pressed underneath the seats. She was breathing heavy—still scared, Dazai supposed. A curling plume of smoke filtered out of her nose and was quickly clogging up the whole compartment.

Dazai coughed into his cloak sleeve.

"Alright, you stupid dragon. I know Pansy is awful, but you didn't have to run all the way over here."

Egg growled.

Dazai paused.

"Yeesh, you're annoying."

With a huff, Dazai lowered himself to the floor. He crossed his legs. "Are you moping? If anyone should be moping, it's me. You've never met Mori, but he's the only thing worth moping over today."

Down here, Dazai could better make out how Egg's body was curled in on itself. She was still growling, and a fresh cloud of smoke spat out at him. Her claws were sharp as ever, but not bloody. Evidently, her tirade across the train hadn't injured anyone too terribly. Egg's eyes flashed a dangerous shade.

Dazai took a deep breath.

He gingerly put his hand out, palm up.

Egg stared. The smoke spewing from her mouth became a little less thick.

But the air was still dense with it, and Dazai's next words were raspy ones.

"You're never going to get to relax ever again, if you don't hurry up and come to me," Dazai told her. "I'll get in trouble for keeping you—they'll send me to jail. And they'll take you to some facility somewhere. To get poked and prodded at for the rest of your miserable little life."

Well...

Probably not, actually.

Dazai's research on the subject of dragons really indicated Egg would likely wind up in a sanctuary somewhere. She'd spend the rest of her days happily flying around with her kind. Open skies above and plentiful fields below.

But Egg didn't know that, and Dazai wasn't about to let her in on the truth.

"Unless you want to become someone's experiment," he slowly drew his hand back—rescinding the offer to save Egg from a fate she wasn't really facing. "Shame. And I thought

we made quite the duo—”

Egg shot forward before Dazai even finished his speech.

The next second, her nose was pressed so far into Dazai’s palm, the force of it knock his whole body back.

“Ugh,” Dazai coughed. “Watch it.”

He looked down at Egg, where she was fit snuggly in the palm of his hand. She batted two sad, puppy-dog eyes up at him. Dazai’s lips twitched up into a smile. He patted her on the head, and she chirped.

“Yeah, yeah. Good dragon.”

Egg’s teeth bared in a dangerous looking smile that had Dazai wincing.

“Alright. That’s enough of that.” He patted her twice on the back, but kept a hand over her wings like she might decide suddenly to fly away again. “We need a plan of action to get you out of here undetected. Lucky us, I always have something up my sleeve.”

She grumbled.

“Glad you asked, Egg. The plan is to ask Hermione for help.”

Dazai grunted as he stood, ignoring the way Egg whined at him to stay put. He patted her on the nose.

He opened the door.

“Hermione, I need—*oh.”*

Hermione spun around to face him, eyes blown and mouth half-open.

Gemma and some Hufflepuff brat stared at him.

“Hello,” Dazai said pleasantly. He slammed the door shut at his back before Egg could even think to poke her head out. It rattled noisily, and drew a flinch from Hermione. “Gemma. It’s been a while. I’m afraid I don’t know your friend..?”

“Cut the crap, Dazai.” Gemma narrowed a glare on him. Her eyes flashed to the door, then back. “A monster was seen by nearly everyone on board. A monster whose description sounds *suspiciously* like the one you were involved with last year.”

Hermione shot him a desperate look.

Dazai rocked on the balls of his feet. “If by *‘involved with’* you mean it attacked me. Then sure.”

Gemma sneered. “I told you,” she said. “I told you—if you hurt even *one* student, I would have you expelled.”

“Now, Gemma,” the other student said. He had a quite but sure voice. Confident enough in himself that he saw no need to raise his pitch, Dazai thought. “Let’s consider this situation carefully.”

She didn’t even look up at him. Gemma’s attention was on Dazai and Dazai alone. “I told you I’ve have problems with him in the past, Gabriel. This is his third strike—I'm hardly too quick on the trigger.”

The Hufflepuff—Gabriel, Dazai supposed—huffed. “A fair consideration of events,” Gabriel continued, unperturbed. “You know, when I was younger, being too quick to anger landed me in terrible fight with a Ravenclaw prefect—”

“You tell everyone that story,” Gemma grunted. “I don’t care.” She took a step forward that Gabriel sniffed at. “And it has never been relevant when you tell it. It’s not relevant *now*. Dazai—”

Dazai didn’t perk up—he'd been at attention ever since Gemma appeared. But he did raise his hands placatingly.

Gemma didn’t look to believe his innocence. “We tracked the monster's location here, only to find you. Do you have something to do with this?”

Though Gemma didn’t move, Dazai’s eyes still wandered to the hall around them. Empty, save for them. And still scattered with the remains of a once-bustling train. Each closed compartment must have held three or four terrified students.

Dazai dropped his hands uselessly. “I’m innocent as always.”

“We were only looking out!” Hermione piped up, looking a little frantic. Dazai doubted she’d ever really been in trouble before. “This is our compartment, here,” she tapped the door Egg was currently hiding behind. “And were just checking to see if the monster was still here.”

“Only to find my least favorite prefect,” Dazai drawled. His eyes snapped to Gabriel, who stiffened upon having Dazai’s attention. “And her friend.”

“Ah... I’m delighted to meet you, Mr. Dazai,” he said, not sounding delighted in the slightest. His voice was still lofty and soft. “I’ve heard so much about you. My name is Gabriel Truman. Hufflepuff prefect.”

Dazai raised a brow. Someone who wasn’t afraid of the Demon Student.

Still...

Gabriel’s smile was grossly condescending.

Dazai decided to ignore him.

He turned back to Gemma to see her glaring a hole in his head. “I think Hogwarts has an infestation of Fire Salamander Bats. That’s hardly my fault.”

Gemma’s brows shot into her hairline. *“Fire Salamander Bats...* That isn’t a real thing.”

Dazai shook his head, fervent. “It is! You should write this down. Identifying the infestation is the first step to cleaning it up!”

“Th-that’s true!” Hermione clambered to back up Dazai’s lie. “About the infestation thing, not the salamander bat thing.” She glanced to Dazai. “Gemma’s right about those not existing. The monster is more likely some form of fairy.”

Gabriel made a considering face at that, while Gemma frowned, disbelieving.

But Dazai was miles ahead of them—brain coursing through hundreds of thoughts per second.

A giddy idea burst to mind.

“Oh!”

Dazai jumped so excitedly and suddenly that both Gemma and Gabriel startled back a full step each.

“It’s Lockhart’s fault! The Cornish Pixies!”

Hermione nodded several times. She was instantly on the same page as him. “It must be! *Oh,* I know he never caught them all!”

“That doesn’t sound like my eye-witness reports at all,” Gemma countered, sounding a bit caught-off guard. But she was no less severe for it. “Dark, large, smelled distinctly of smoke —”

“Yeah, that sounds right,” Dazai agreed.

“Cornish pixies are *blue—”*

“Not this one. Lockhart painted it. I saw him do it,” Dazai lied. Lockhart deserved whatever backlash came from this. Honestly, it was a little validating to just bold-face make things up about the man who was constantly making things up about *him*. “But Lockhart made the pixie so mad, it threw over a candlestick and burnt his robes. Dark and smokey—this must be Lockhart’s fault.”

Gabriel cleared his throat. *“Professor* Lockhart,” he said pointedly, “is not on this train.”

Dazai shrugged. “It happened yesterday.”

“The pixie must have hidden in someone’s luggage, only to wreak havoc when they opened their bag,” Hermione agreed.

“It makes perfect sense,” Dazai spoke over Gemma and Gabriel’s wide-eyed staring. He turned a grinning look onto Hermione. “We make a good team, Hermione. Have you ever thought of being a detective?”

She batted his arm, clearly exasperated beneath a deep desire to keep out of trouble.

The path to safety, in this case, was mired in lies and deception.

Gemma’s stared them down, like she was assessing the truth with her eyes alone. Her eyes went to Dazai first (obviously). He was all cheeky grins and bouncy feet. She would get nothing out of him. Then, Gemma turned to Hermione.

The weak link.

Hermione was clever and daring. But she was in no way a good liar. A quick fib didn’t need to hold up to much scrutiny. This lie did.

Dazai chirped up, snapping the prefects’ attention back to him before Hermione’s quivering eyes could give the lie away. “But if Gemma has this one covered, we’ll head back to the safety of our room. I can only solve so many mysteries before Snape hunts me down to pester me.”

It worked like a charm. At once, Gemma and Gabriel were focused on him again.

“You’d better get to finding this pixie, now. Before someone gets hurt,” Dazai poked.

“No one will get hurt on my watch,” Gemma said.

Just as she spoke, a young Ravenclaw suddenly peeked their head out a door down the hall.

The prefects both turned to him—saw the frightened look on his face, and the smudge of soot on his cheek. He had his hands wrapped around his wand, protectively.

Gemma clicked her tongue.

Abruptly, she whirled on Dazai.

“You,” she said, stern, “keep out of trouble. Don’t think we’re not keeping an eye on you.”

Dazai raised a pacifying hand. “You’re the boss.”

Gemma grunted. Then, she nudged Gabriel in the side.

“Let’s go. The sooner we find this pixie, the sooner everyone will be out of danger."

Gabriel hummed. “That does seem more pertinent, at the moment.” He cast a final, thoughtful glance over Dazai and Hermione. His eyes lingered over them for a second too long—assessing. Then, he smiled prettily for Gemma. “Did I ever tell you the story of the time I traded my wand to a forest fairy—”

“No one asked, Gabriel,” Gemma said.

And then, they were gone.

Dazai watched them for a moment longer, as the prefects stopped to question another student. The Ravenclaw pointed to a spot down the hall, then shrugged.

Gemma glanced over her shoulders. Her eyes found Dazai’s immediately and narrowed.

Dazai rolled his shoulders back.

“Oh, that was awful,” Hermione keened now they were out of hearing range.

Dazai raised a brow. He grinned. “It wasn’t so bad. Gemma’s pretty easy to manipulate, once you figure out her weak spot.”

Hermione stared at him like he’d grown a second head.

“Never mind that,” he said. “Let’s duck back in here with Egg until those two clear out.”

She startled. “Is that safe?”

“Sure is. Me and Egg had a good talk, and she’s alright now.”

Though Hermione didn’t seem quite believing, she still followed him without complaint as he opened the door again and stepped back into it. He shut it when they were both inside.

At some point, Egg had moved from the floor to the seats. She was now sitting primly by the window, but she perked up eagerly at Dazai’s return.

Hermione blinked several times. “She’s... Egg is calmed down? How?”

Dazai wiggled his fingers in the air without explanation. Hermione narrowed a look onto him that Dazai pointedly ignored.

“We’ll sit for a few minutes until Gemma and Gabriel are gone. Then I’ll need you to sneak out and grab Luna’s bag from Draco’s compartment, so I have something to smuggle her out in.”

With that, Dazai took a seat at Egg’s side.

“Say,” he said, “you can cast the locking charm again, can’t you? I’d rather die than have Pansy or Gemma barge in again. Although... what are the odds Pansy just kills me herself? That wouldn’t be so bad...”

Hermione shot him a silencing glare, but she cast the charm regardless.

“I can’t believe I just lied to prefects,” she grumbled, wand raised. “First the test answer keys now this...”

(As for the mission to secretly smuggle Egg out of Hogwarts...

Dazai was tentatively calling this one a success. Terrified classmates and suspicious prefects notwithstanding.)

-

The train arrived to station an hour later.

Dazai had changed out of his robes shortly after Hermione went to fetch Luna's bag. By the time she returned, he was dressed in his usual mafia fare instead: white button-up, dark slacks, suit jacket. A tie was tight against his neck.

Hermione commented, as they waited to un-board, "you look like you're going somewhere fancy."

Dazai glanced down at himself, then back to her. "You think?"

She nodded. "Where are you headed?"

"Airport, then Yokohama," he told her. "You?"

She raised a brow at his lack of explanation, but didn't press. "Home, naturally. My parents will be waiting outside the barrier to pick me up."

Dazai hummed acknowledgement. He would be taking a taxi, which was by far preferable to the limousine he'd ridden home last year. Mori had been with him, after all.

This time, it was a quiet taxi ride, then an even quieter plane ride. The Port Mafia's private jet was lovely, Dazai had always thought. It was sleek and silent. Dazai had indulged himself many times in the thought that one day, it might just drop out of the sky and kill him on impact with the ground. Bloody and gruesome and too quick to hurt, hopefully. Of course, the odds of that happening were terribly unlikely.

But at least the Port Mafia security wouldn't raise too many brows when he included a *dragon* among his luggage.

Speaking of, Egg was once again curled up secretly in Luna's too-large bag.

Dazai made sure it was as securely closed as possible, and that the train station was as empty as it could get. Then, he nodded to Hermione.

"Let's head out, then. Wouldn't want to worry your parents."

Hermione undid the lock on their door. She and Dazai walked down the mostly-empty corridor, and made work of ignoring the evidence of Egg's panic around them.

Dazai carefully stepped around a bag, left behind in someone's haste.

"They'll be fine, really," she said. "I'm more concerned you'll miss your flight home, Dazai."

Dazai flapped a hand, disarming her worries casually. “S’not an issue.”

The real issue was leaving the train station without getting into too much trouble. Between the Daily Prophet’s slander, and the dragon currently hiding in his bag, Dazai was just asking for trouble waltzing around in public like he was.

Hermione guided them out of the train. She walked them along a back wall, where passerbys were too involved in their own doings to pay them any mind.

In the bustle of the crowd, Dazai recognized only one face.

Lucius Malfoy.

He was standing beside a rather severe looking woman—Pansy's mother, he supposed. Draco, Pansy, and Blaise were gathered with them. Dazai wondered what all they were discussing. But by the fill of Draco’s shoulders, Dazai didn’t think it was anything his friend was happy with.

Similarly, Dazai was glad he didn’t have to juggle a conversation like that right now. Ducking around the crowd was a blessing.

Dazai silently thanked Hermione for her consideration, and before he knew, it they were passing through the magical gateway into the muggle world.

Dazai shivered as the last of that foreign magic shrugged off of him.

“Alright?”

“Sure,” he said, mostly telling the truth. The discomfort now beating at his whole body was more disorientating than painful, for now. He looked around. “Where are your folks?”

Hemione bounced. *“Oh,* around here somewhere.” She searched around herself. “You should meet them! Mom and Dad are always saying they want to meet my friends.”

Dazai nodded absentmindedly, though he truly had no desire to do so. He was still looking around the muggle station. The people here didn’t even spare them a passing glance. And, realizing this, the anchor that had weighed on Dazai’s chest for the last several months lifted ever-so-slightly.

But only slightly. The dark shadow always hanging over him persisted like a bad cough.

Dazai cleared his throat, smokey.

“Maybe next time,” he said, smiling. At Hermione’s deflated look, he continued, “you’re right. I shouldn’t miss my plane.”

Hermione nodded in understanding, though she seemed somewhat upset at having been turned down. Her curls bounced. “For once,” she teased, “you say something responsible.”

Dazai grinned.

“Alright, then. It was lovely chatting with you, Dazai. If not terribly stressful.” She made a face. “But never mind that now. Have a good break?”

“You too,” he smiled. “See you in a few weeks. Let me know if you have any grand realizations about transfiguration when we meet next.”

“Of course!”

They giggled, said another goodbye, and departed.

Dazai watched Hermione disappear into the crowd, and only turned away when he saw her hug a man with curls like her own.

Then, he was alone.

Solitude in the midst of a bustling train station.

Dazai sighed. His good humor from before vanished, replaced by something altogether less emotive and more-so akin to a cat soaked from cold rains.

It was time to go back home. And just like last year...

Dazai wondered why it felt like he must be drowning.

He hailed a taxi with a raised hand.

Home sweet home.

-

That night, Dazai bent over his desk.

It was scratched and stained. Old and used. Dazai knew the grooves by heart, and knew how if you pressed back against the left-most drawer, a secret compartment would pop open. Dazai bowed over it as if in prayer.

The desk lamp turned everything red.

Dazai flipped open Ginny’s diary.

‘...and your name would be?’

Tom Riddle had waited for his answer all day.

‘I’ll tell you my name,’ Dazai at last wrote back, *‘but only if you answer my question first.’*

‘I’m your diary, now. You can ask me anything you would like.’

Dazai penned, *‘Are you?’*

A pause.

‘I’m afraid I don’t understand your question.’

‘Are you *a diary?’*

The room was silent except for the sound of pen scratching against paper. A few seconds after each response was penned, it would bleed away into nothing. The page would be empty once again.

He wrote, *‘I don’t make a habit of introducing myself to inanimate objects. Or to strange creatures. But a person’s consciousness, living suspended in the pages of a diary? I might introduce myself to them.’*

Everything was dark. Everything was red. A clock ticked somewhere nearby, and the room was cold with Yokohama winter.

‘Clever boy,’ said Tom Riddle.

‘Dazai Osamu.'

'Then it's a a pleasure to formally meet you, Dazai Osamu.’

Chapter End Notes

happy birthday to everyone and have a nice week :)

next up: Yokohama

Coil

Chapter Summary

oh hey thats the title of the fic

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

From the outset, Port Mafia's headquarters looked like any other high-rise. A thousand shiny windows, a hundred pointless doors, a dozen big-wigs twirling their mustaches. Paperwork. Document shredders. Prostitutes. Copy. Paste. Delete. The tidy front desk was stationed by a cheery looking brunette. If you walked fifty feet over to the next skyscraper, you'd probably find an equally brunette receptionist manning an equally tidy front desk.

That was one of the key reasons ability users were able to stay on the down-low:

Subtlety.

Something wizards entirely lacked in.

Yokohama wasn't mile-wide castles. It wasn't owls and dragons. It certainly wasn't secret doors built into the walls of *very* public taverns in the middle of *even more public* busy cities.

Yokohama was gangs. Was mafias. Was the understanding that as long as you minded your own business, those criminal organizations would keep you safe. It was underground. It was secret as-in *actually* secret.

But if he was being honest, Dazai found the whole thing a little tedious. And anyway, what kind of secret was shared with an entire city full of people?

Dazai wiggled his fingers in the open air. The lack of excess latent magic around felt strange against his skin—the buzzing that had accompanied him for months now mostly absent. And his bones were stiff from writing.

Tom Riddle had kept him company through the night.

But throughout the day, Dazai kept the company of his father.

Father was sleeping, lying stiffly across his bed like a corpse. He really looked like he was dead, and Dazai had compulsively checked the man's breathing several times within the last hour just to check he wasn't. But there it was: the staggered *puff-pull* of the Mafia Boss' chest. He still smelled a bit dead.

Dazai leaned back into his chair, stationed at Father's bedside. It was tall-backed and wooden and creaked whenever Dazai so much as breathed. The chair was as stiff and uncomfortable as his father looked.

At least Father wasn't shouting obscenities anymore. Dazai easily preferred a stiff back to a pounding headache.

Though a swift death sounded all the better.

While he sat daily vigil, Dazai waggled his fingers vaguely in the air. He mimed rolling a coin, though his galleons were currently several hundred miles away at Hogwarts. But without an actual coin, the motion felt strange. Empty.

With his other hand, he reflexively flicked open-then-closed a pocketknife. He'd swiped it from a grunt two hours earlier. They'd yet to come back for it, and Dazai didn't think they ever would. The grip had a good feel in his hand. And even though Dazai's wrist was bruised where Father had grabbed it earlier, he didn't fumble the knife. The blade was just that well balanced—that perfectly-handled.

Port Mafia certainly kept good weaponry. Hogwarts only had those awful sticks.

Dazai flicked the blade open and pretended to cut the air. It would have been a clean slice, had the air any veins to sever. He imagined it did—imagined blood spilling all over the bed and the floor. The imagery had Dazai's fingers twitching over his knife in a way that would have Snape jumping.

Dazai kicked the bed.

Father didn't stir.

"Don't mistreat our patient, Shuuji."

Dazai groaned.

He knew that voice. He hated that slimy, good-for-nothing voice.

"It isn't like he's going to wake up," Dazai said, twisting in his seat to find Mori shutting the bedroom door behind him. "And don't call me that."

Mori had his doctor's bag with him. Dazai didn't know what Mori thought he was going to do with it, seeing as Father was hardly suffering from that sort of injury.

Mori gave him a condoling look that seemed to say, *"this again?"*

Dazai brushed him off. "How come I'm babysitting, anyway? With him out-for-the-count like this, I can get out and do some actual work. Speaking of, I have some ideas about our drug shipping—"

"Shuuji," Mori quelled.

Dazai's mouth clicked shut.

"As long as your father is alive, your role is by his side. You know this. We can talk about business after."

"And you're doing such a good job healing him," Dazai said snidely. His eyes fell again to Mori's bag. A scalpel was sticking out the front pocket, looking messy and haphazard. "...with your knives."

Mori ignored him. "Now, now, Shuuji. Saying such cruel things while looking so cute hurts me."

Dazai made a face. When he crossed and uncrossed his legs, the skirt of his dress frilled and creased. It was white, lacey, and hugged down past his knees. Cute wasn't exactly the word he would have used. The corset was too tight and the sleeves too poofy to be described as anything other than *uncomfortable*. And his hair, which had just begun to tickle his cheeks at the start of winter had already been cut short the day prior, at Mori's insistence.

"You like it when I say things like that," he accused.

Mori chuckled. He didn't disagree.

Then, he crossed the room and dropped his bag on the bedside table. He pulled out a stethoscope a second later and placed it on Father's chest. The scalpel stayed put where it was, unused. It shined sickly yellow under the fluorescent overheads.

"He's still breathing," Dazai told the doctor.

"Yes, you've done a lovely job watching over him," Mori said, ears still pressed into his tool. "When this is all over, I'd love to have you as my assistant, Shuuji."

Dazai made a face that Mori couldn't see.

"Not really. I don't have any patience for sick people." Dazai shifted away when Mori's examination suddenly reached over into his space. His skin prickled. "Hey, if he wakes up and tries to kill me again, do I get some kind of compensation?"

Dazai frowned, remembering how just seven hours earlier, Father had woken up in a stupor. They'd been chatting for about five minutes, at which point Father had suddenly reached out to grab him without any warning. *Like a wild dog,* Dazai had likened numbly. Father fell back to sleep only ten minutes after that.

"I'm afraid not," Mori said. His eyes briefly flicked to Dazai's face, checking him over for new injury at the remark. Evidently satisfied, he dropped the stethoscope from his ears. "As expected, the Boss' health is on a steep decline."

Dazai watched his father's slow breaths in and out. Watched his lungs inflate then deflate mechanically. Stubbornly alive.

But still, something about the man was distinctly corpse-like. And even when Father woke, his limbs were stiff and his words were harsh. Like rigor mortis had already set in. He was rotting from the brain out, and taking all his subordinates with him. Boss was a ghost haunting Port Mafia from his to-be death bed.

Dazai's nose wrinkled.

Mori caught his disgruntled expression and laughed. His laugh made the sound of glass when it shattered across tile, and Dazai leaned in to cut himself on it.

"It can't be helped," Dazai said, sounding nonplussed.

Mori's tinkling laugh continued. "I suppose not." He glanced to Father's bed, as if debating whether he should speak in the Boss' presence. Dazai got the distinct feeling that his hemming-and-hawing gesture was intentionally drawn-out. "Tell me about Hogwarts"

Dazai blinked at the nonsequiter.

"What about it?"

Mori stepped away from Father, but left his bag at the bedside table. Dazai eyed the scalpel for all the remaining seconds it was within the doctor's reach. Then, Mori crossed the room to stare out the window. He watched the people below—a ferris wheel on the horizon—with eyes like a ruler to his kingdom.

"Humor an old man," Mori said. He wasn't really that old, but stress had done nothing for the wrinkles lining his smile. "How is school treating you?"

Dazai eyed him, distrusting this turn in conversation before it even began.

He considered Mori for a long moment.

"I'm public enemy number one," Dazai finally said. He decided to simply treat Mori's request as a mission update, rather than anything more prying. "A certain group of students has decided it's their job to have me expelled. I was ignoring them, for the time being. But with Lucius' test complete, I'm free to torment them all I'd like."

Free time. Now *that* was something Dazai had been lacking.

It felt almost like breathing, again.

From his deathbed, Father puffed out a wheezing breath of his own.

"Hmm."

He frowned at Mori, but the backlight made it difficult to tell the man's posture.

"These children," Mori said, "are just an annoyance, then? Not any actual threat."

In the window, Dazai's reflection shook its head.

Mori's eye caught his in the glass. "Keep them around, then."

Dazai couldn't let his expression change. He held it a blank mask, but felt something uneasy curl in his gut regardless.

"Try not to do anything too reckless without my permission, *hm?"*

It felt like he'd just stepped in something unsavory.

Stepped into one of Mori's unspoken plots.

His foot twitched to shake off the invisible contamination.

"Pansy's little gang is only going to get bigger," Dazai said slowly. When Mori didn't object, his eyes narrowed. "They could kill me. They've wanted to, and the magical community by large would support them. Their only purpose is as an obstacle to me."

Mori's arms linked behind his back, regal. "If you were so easily killed by schoolchildren, Shuuji, I'd not have picked you for this job. Any other twelve-year-old would do fine."

Those words bounced around in Dazai's head for a long moment. Father's breathing filled in the silence.

Gasping.

Always gasping.

Dazai had always been in the dark as to Mori's various machinations. But now, something in Mori's words resonated with him. He pounced on it.

If you were so easily killed, he'd said. It echoed like a wound in the air.

"The Daily Prophet is all but telling wizards to kill me."

Mori hummed.

"You anticipated it," Dazai said, matter of fact. "You wanted them to."

Mori's eyes found him in the glass. The slight quirk of his lips, the tilt of his eyes—it was all the confirmation Dazai needed.

"I'm surprised you didn't figure that much out sooner," Mori crooned. "My, those *friends* of yours really are corrupting you. The Shuuji I knew was always so quick on the draw. But this Dazai character is always playing the fool."

Before Dazai knew it, he was standing.

The movement was sharp and jerking—all the righteous fury of a schoolboy. But his face was as ever a dull mask. If you ignored the way his hand flexed over the knife, you could mistake him for bored. His dress flared out at the sudden movement. "This scheme of yours grows

more obnoxious by the day," Dazai said, forcing a drawl into his voice. "Can't you ever be upfront for once?"

Dazai wanted to drill holes into Mori's skull with piercing eyes.

But all at once, Mori's attention had narrowed in on something else.

It had Dazai going entirely still at once.

His bones were made of cement.

The breathing—*gasping*, he corrected—had changed. Stiffened and pulled with consciousness in the way a sleeping man's did not.

"Good afternoon, Boss," Mori said.

Professionalism dripped out of Mori, his typical slimy visage only there if you knew to look. And Dazai always looked.

Father grunted, pained.

Dazai at once fell back into his seat. The fight had withered entirely from him, and left Dazai feeling too much like a collapsible push-button animal. His strings went loose and he ragdolled. It was innate. You sit in your father's presence.

Father's eyes were smokey.

Dazai stared into them like he was seeing into the Sensing Stone.

But what was hiding in there, curling and writhing around? Powerful and foggy and white—twisting and cold and black.

Nothing alive shined within Father's eyes. This man was dead while he was still living.

Familiarity had Dazai wanting to look away. Loyalty had him holding still.

"How are you feeling?" Mori asked when Dazai did not.

Father made a groaning noise that should have been an answer. But he was almost entirely incoherent, instead. Dazai had to strain to make out any meaning, and a long strain of moans and mumbles seemed to be saying, *"you awful, dreadful doctor. I'll have your head—have you killed— breathing so damn loud—"*

Dazai looked up to Mori. He tried to force some of the usual cheer in his voice, but it came out cold and fragile instead. "Shall I?" he asked, waving his knife in point.

Mori smiled humorlessly at him.

"Shut up boy!" Father suddenly spat.

Dazai jumped in place. His grip slipped, and the knife clattered uselessly to the floor. Trapped behind pursed lips, his teeth clacked together.

"You let him get too out of line," Father continued to grouch and grumble. *"I'll have you killed for that."*

Dazai felt his blood run cold, despite himself. He wasn't really afraid, he was just feeling frozen from the inside-out.

Mori nodded, acquiescing. "I'll inform your executives that I'm to be killed posthaste, Sir."

Father's expression curdled. Some deranged thought probably flickered behind those half-dead eyes of his.

Dazai would have rolled his eyes, had he not suddenly gone as stiff as dry bone.

Because that was, really, the problem? Wasn't it?

For all Dazai kicked and fussed about being out of the loop—for all he made fast work of doing Mori's tasks *anyway*. When it really came down to it, Dazai couldn't move at all. He was fundamentally weak. Kick the bed a dozen times while Father slept, then stagger his breaths, cold and still, when Father woke.

Unbecoming of a mafioso. Mori would say that. Mori *had* said that.

He could pick a fight with Mori. With Snape. Could narrow his eyes and lie to Dumbledore. To Lucius.

But there was a weakness, burnt into Dazai's veins. Soiled at his very core.

When Father spoke—when Father even just woke—Dazai's entire world came to a stop.

And there was the sound of dogs barking in his ears, always.

Like this, Dazai thought he might never move again.

These days, Father was more unpredictable than ever. More likely to raise his hand, or raise his voice. Dazai couldn't be surprised by it. Barely felt he cared about it. *It's just noise,* Dazai had thought on many an occasion when his ears were ringing from abuse.

But still. His heart would beat too fast. That twisting feeling would bite his stomach. He'd flinch back, curl into himself. Dazai was good at not feeling anything, but his body was always failing him in the strangest of ways. *So human,* he thought, *so weak and ugly.*

I'm not afraid, he'd think, knobby knees knocking together like a baby's rattle. *I don't feel fear.*

Which is why Dazai was not surprised when Father abruptly burst into action.

"Worthless!" Father gasped, desperate and out of his mind with ill.

This is also why Dazai merely flinched, but did not dodge, Father's hand—outstretched with Mori's forgotten scalpel cutting through the air.

"I—I'll Kill him myself!" The scalpel plunged for Dazai's face. *"Kill him!"*

Father's gasps. Kennel dogs' panting.

Dazai forgets which.

-

The sun set over the horizon, laying out across the Forbidden Forest and spilling between the peaks of two distant mountains. Snow burned an acidic white underneath it. The whole scene seemed unbearably cold, even from safely within the castle walls. Phoenix ashes turned red when caught in a beam of dying light. And something about it struck Severus, absurdly, as quite lonely.

Minerva, Poppy, and Severus stood gathered at the face of Albus' desk. It was quiet without the phoenix's chirping, or preening. And the snow softly falling outside was no louder than a blanket gently covering over the land.

Severus pressed the pads of his fingers together and pushed. The index, the middle, the ring. His fingertips turned white under the alternating patterns of pressure. It did nothing to steady the curdling feeling in his gut.

Kennel.

His mind kept going back to that word. Echoing it on loop like the repetition would clear anything up.

Punishment.

Kennel.

Patch-up.

There they go again: revolving around in Severus' brain without conclusion.

The problem wasn't that Severus couldn't stop thinking about it. In fact—he *needed* to be thinking about it. Needed to *do something* about it. If not, it would only torment him forever. And when Dazai was hurt, it would be entirely Severus' fault, now.

The problem was how Dazai had said it.

Casual, in that lilting way of his. Like the sheer horror of what he was saying meant nothing at all. That this was the easiest thing in the world to admit, because there was something else —something worse—he couldn't.

And Severus had let Dazai walk right out the door.

Down to the train, back to his *kennel.*

There was that damn word again. *Kennel.*

At his core, Severus was a fundamentally worthless person. Behind every echo of *'kennel'* was the echo of a much wiser *'bigger picture.'* It was always enough to have him stopping. Considering. Double-thinking: *am I overreacting?* Dazai didn't seem bothered.

Poppy would know what to do.

Then winter break began, the children left for their homes, and Poppy *did* know what to do.

The matron of Hogwarts was fuming.

"I won't have this," Poppy said. She had crossed her arms over her chest some twenty minutes ago, then remained firmly in that position ever since. "I'm meant to care for these kids. If I can't even help *one boy,* what use am I?"

Minerva, shoulders stiff and expression tight, seemed to reel at those words.

Severus met her eyes. He said nothing.

When Poppy got into one of these fiercely protective moods, it was often best to remain silent. Many a student had learnt that first-hand, when their teenaged recklessness landed them in the infirmary. Severus himself had learned the hard way—in his later years complaining of stress headaches, and his younger ones whining over a busted lip from some scuffle he'd probably not instigated.

Albus was a genius in many, many ways. This was not one of them.

"Now, Poppy," Albus said, his honeyed tone was cloying, "as Severus has told it, Yokohama is hardly amenable to our interference. If Mr. Dazai's *home life* is unsavory, I'm afraid there is little to be done for it."

"'Unsavory,'" Poppy spat. "It's *abusive*. Call it what it is, Albus."

The headmaster's stare was sharp and quelling, but Poppy was unflappable, like this. "Word choice aside, I do appreciate your investigation into the subject. I feel more confident, now, in writing Mr. Dazai's strange behavior off. He's a troubled boy with a penchant for acting out."

Poppy stared.

"That's your takeaway from this? Mr. Dazai is being abused, and your only reaction is *'he's not some violent murderer like everyone says, he's just traumatized?"* She practically spat the

words out.

Albus smiled thinly at her, condoling. “If you can convince the Yokohama government to have to removed from his father’s care, you are more than welcome to. But my direct interference will hardly benefit Hogwarts.”

"You're the *only* one who can help!"

“If you don’t mind my saying, Albus,” Minerva said, shooting Poppy an antsy look, “the students *are* Hogwarts. Without them, it’s just an old pile of stone.”

“Hogwarts is a symbol for the magical community. As such, we need to prioritize the bigger picture. An equal learning ground for every magic user. A defense against dark forces.”

Severus hardly had the words for a response. This conversation of theirs was achingly familiar, and had repeated at least a dozen times since the year prior. By this point, he’d conceded that Albus would do nothing—wouldn't mobilize any authorities, wouldn’t hire a counselor, wouldn’t consider *anything* other than his damned Bigger Picture. But that didn’t mean Severus’ stomach wasn’t tied up in burning knots. Nor did it stop his foot from tapping anxiously on the tile floor.

He’d never gone against Albus’ wishes before. Had never wanted to.

“Then what do you have in mind?” Severus asked, rather than voicing his true thoughts aloud. Poppy and Minerva shot him commiserating and questioning looks, respectively. “All evidence suggests Mr. Dazai is innocent of the petrifications. What is our next move?”

Albus hummed, considering. He made a gesture, like checking a box in the air. “We have to assume the re-opening of the Chamber of Secrets is a ploy by the Death Eaters. In keeping with last year, I’m to conclude they have an insider. Someone acting as a mole in Hogwarts.”

Minerva’s brow furrowed. “It was Quirinus last year. And we don’t have any new staff, except Gilderoy,” she said pointedly. “At the risk of sounding rude, Albus, Gilderoy doesn’t exactly have the brains to mastermind anything.”

“Do you put it past him to manufacture some tragedy for him to fix up, though?” Snape asked.

“I suppose not,” Minerva said. “Still. Something of this level is beyond him.”

Albus nodded. He seemed to take their dislike of Gilderoy in stride. Then, “I’ve also written Gilderoy off as our culprit.”

Severus felt his eyes narrow. Something about Albus’ tone, trailing off as it was, was also quite familiar. It immediately had Severus bristling. He fought to smooth the feeling down. “You still think the Death Eaters are colluding with a student.”

Minerva gasped.

Poppy shook her head, even when Albus made a gesture saying, *yes, that's exactly what I'm thinking.*

"I've seen to practically every student here, Albus. None of them are capable of something like this."

"It's not Mr. Dazai," Albus continued over her. Like the matron's testimony held no value in the face of Albus' inconceivable logic. Reaching some invisible conclusion, he suddenly turned to Minerva. "Given the fruits of your investigation, I'd say it's safe to have your prefect stop watching him for now."

Minerva looked like she might argue, but Severus was already getting a headache and had no desire to further it with pointless yelling. He cut in before she could get a word in.

"What's the likelihood it's not a student?" He asked. "What if this is like last year?"

"Ah... our third player."

Albus' eyes slipped to the chessboard set into his bookshelf. The pieces were all laid out in a nonsensical order. As though he hadn't been sure where each piece was supposed to rest at. Or if he'd been playing himself and gotten confused half-way through. Only, Severus knew that couldn't be the case. Albus was callous, but he wasn't forgetful. One of the pawns had been discarded off to the side, and the black queen hugged the edge so closely it looked to be on the verge of falling off all on its own.

"Third player..." Minerva muttered under her breath.

Severus narrowed a glare onto Albus at that—here the man went again, picking and choosing who to leave entirely in the dark. But although Albus clearly saw his stare, he said nothing about it. Severus again felt a familiar niggling annoyance.

Sometimes, it felt like he was trying to reason with a brick wall. And not the magical one in Diagon Alley that opened with a clever wand trick, but a cold, unforgiving muggle one.

"The theft of the Philosopher's Stone last year could only have been accomplished by an Ability User," Albus said, matter-of-fact. He seemed now to be adressing the whole room, though his response held logic for Severus alone. "A group unaligned with Hogwarts or Death Eaters. A genuine third party... as for their motivations..."

He glanced to Severus, clearly expecting him to fill the blank.

"They barely even seem to exist, Albus. I can't tell you any more than you already know."

Albus sighed, sounding terribly put upon. It had Severus bristling yet again.

"I'm sorry," Poppy raised a hand, brows furrowed in blatant confusion. Minerva, too, seemed to have lost the conversation's trail. *"Ability Users?"*

"Special Ability Users," Severus clarified. This alone cleared up nothing, and he found himself again silently cursing Albus' tight lips. "Neither muggles nor wizards. Individuals

who draw from a different source of power, but lead a similarly private life to magic-users. I only learned of them recently," he looked sharply to Albus, "and have learned nothing about them since."

Beside him, Poppy and Minerva both suddenly stiffened. Their eyes bloomed wide, and they stared at Severus.

A secret group of people, just as hidden as the wizarding world? It doesn't seem quite as unfathomable now, does it?

He very carefully did not look their way.

Yokohama, again, burned a brilliantly confusing little hole in Severus' brain.

Still, "Ability Users can't use magic," Severus said slowly, "whatever strange power they have is individual and limited. They can't spell-cast, and can only use the one ability. At least, that's what my sources claim. So if they are poking around Hogwarts, it's not as staff or student."

Albus nodded confirmation.

Minerva, however, was gawping like an underfed goldfish.

"I... that's not possible. I've never heard of such a thing."

"I'm afraid it's true," Albus said. But he didn't sound particularly pained for it, and instead came off as rather clinical. "To pass so effortlessly through our trials last year, they must have been a Special Ability User. Only they would have such power to outright erase a spell."

"And this..." Minerva tasted the word, *"group,"* she settled on, "is involved with the Death Eaters? To what end?"

"Not any more."

Severus startled. *Not any more?* That was news to him.

He shot Albus a severe look that didn't shake the headmaster at all.

"During the wizarding war, I'd heard rumor these Ability Users had aligned themselves with the Death Eaters," he said, voice plain despite the gravity of his words. "But they disappeared shortly before the war ended. I have heard nothing of them since."

"That's..."

Horrifying.

And Severus hadn't even known. Ability Users were a shadow. A ghost. Slipping in through the cracks and blending in underneath. Here, but not. A secret party with unknown intentions that could turn the tide of war.

Dread curdled his stomach.

"Though," Albus continued. He seemed unbothered with the aghast stares on him. "The Death Eaters likely would have won the war had the Ability Users continued to support them."

Minerva swallowed. Hard. "But *we* won."

"Precisely."

"So..."

"Special Ability Users are, as of now, an unrelated entity," Albus reiterated. "Unaligned with anyone, save themselves. I've no idea why they've suddenly become involved again. Nor where to start with uncovering them."

Minerva bit her lip, and Severus pinched the bridge of his nose.

There was no saving his headache, now.

"But," Albus said. His whole body seemed to be sighing, and Severus felt that deeply. Or, he would have, had Albus not been a source of his own annoyance at the moment. So instead, Severus stubbornly felt no sympathy for the headmaster. "The Chamber of Secrets has opened before. The source of this problem is plainly a magic-user. I doubt our third player is involved, and I'd prefer we focus our search within the student body. Severus, Minerva—I ask you to have your prefects keep a closer watch on their housemates. Have them report any suspicious behaviors."

Minerva made a face at that, and Severus felt himself doing the same.

"Not to sound redundant," Severus said tightly, "but every student is simply going to point their finger at Mr. Dazai. They've already decided he's guilty regardless of evidence."

Minerva nodded grimly. "He's been exonerated of guilt twice now, to no change. Percy Weasley tells me Mr. Dazai has racked up quite a few enemies."

Albus waved them off. "Ignore those complainants, then. Focus on the outliers."

"How is that going to help anything?"

Even Albus blinked at the suddenly sharp tone.

The normally-patient Poppy was practically scowling, now.

"Pardon?"

"Ignoring problems is what led Hogwarts into this mess in the first place," she said, and Severus winced despite himself. "As matron, it's my duty to keep the students in good health. Let me—"

Before Poppy could say whatever she intended to, a large, white owl suddenly tapped its beak against the window. Severus and Minerva both startled, while Poppy turned to glare at it—like the owl were somehow at fault for Albus' one-track mindset.

Albus raised a hand to silence them, before crossing the room and opening the window.

A gust of chilled air suddenly rushed across the room. Severus' hair caught in it and tangled. With the window now open, Severus became abruptly aware of the late hour. The sun had finished setting. It was dark outside, now, except for how white the snow was that it seemed always to be glowing. The Forbidden Forest was only a shadow now. And those two distant peaks blended into the sky, black.

The owl dropped a single letter into Albus' waiting palm. It was sealed with red wax seal emblazoned with the letters *DP.*

The Daily Prophet.

"What are you going to tell the Daily Prophet?"

Albus didn't look away from his letter, but he did reply to Minerva's question while he read, "Hogwarts is investigating the matter of the petrifications, and will continue to do so until the truth is found. We are investigating several leads. Classes will continue."

"Is that safe?" Poppy asked, voicing aloud the question everyone had been thinking since Mrs. Norris' petrification. "The Daily Prophet is calling for classes to be put on hold. At least until this issue is sorted. If another student is hurt..." she trailed off uncomfortably. "They have the entire community's support on that."

"And yet, Hogwarts will persevere. As a symbol to the community—*Hogwarts does not back away from a fight."*

Severus envisioned, privately, what would happen were Hogwarts to shut down for another week. Another month. Until they found the culprit, and the students were again safe. But while all he saw was necessary precautions, Albus saw weakness.

He sighed, tired with this never-ending argument of theirs.

Albus seemed tired as well, in his own way. Letter still open under his nose, Albus returned to his desk. He pulled the seat back with a wordless spell, and settled into it with a *fwhump*. Only then did he look up.

"I will sort this out," he said, tapping the paper. "You all have your duties to attend to. *Ah,* and Poppy? How much longer until the petrification cure is completed?"

She stared at him for a moment. "It still needs another few months to brew."

"I see... Well then. Thank you for your time," he dismissed. "And do try to enjoy the rest of your winter break. With such rowdy students, you only have so much leisure time."

Albus chuckled. His laugh was twinkling in a way that had never grated Severus' nerves before today. Poppy bristled beside him.

Severus wasted no time in leaving. His head was pounding with bitter thoughts that could not be resolved. Poppy was hot on his heels, and seemed to kick up dust in her haste to leave with him. Only Minerva paused to say a kinder farewell. Then she followed after them.

Enjoy your break.

It echoed in Severus' head noisily and impossibly. As if he had felt relaxed at *any* point in the last year!

Enjoy your break, he'd said.

The door shut at their backs.

To Severus, it felt like someone had forced the breath from his lungs. Sudden, and cold, and harsh. But the second after, all his muscles untensed and he could breathe on his own again.

They stood in silence for a moment, while the gargoyles watched them pointlessly.

Then,

"Mphm!"

Severus blinked several times.

Minerva jumped.

"What in *Merlin's* name was that noise, Poppy?"

Poppy shook her head and, without a word except for that agitated squeak, stomped away from Albus' office door. Severus and Minerva shared a glance behind her back. One that said, *did the matron just squeak? Should we be concerned?*

They hastened to catch up.

"Sometimes I can't *stand* that man!" Poppy vented loudly.

Minerva winced at her volume. "Don't let the students hear you say that."

Mercifully, a quick glance around revealed the hall to be empty. Only a handful of students ever remained on campus over winter break. Moreso this year, students were eager to go home. The threat of petrification and the 'Demon Student' hung over Hogwarts, and Severus wondered if some students might not even return come January. Still... not for the first time, was Severus glad for the reprieve. "We're alone," he told them, purposefully, "though Minerva is right. Save your slander for your office."

"Those Weasely twins are always around, somewhere," Minerva said, clearly disbelieving if her searching glances were anything to go by.

Severus agreed with an unhappy hum.

Poppy, however, seemed to have reached her limit. Severus steeled himself accordingly.

“So involved with his *bigger picture,”* she practically spat. And—*wow,* it had been some time since Severus had last seen their matron truly angry over something. Last time, it had been some after those Weasely twins exploded a hole in the infirmary wall—nearly maiming one of their classmates in the process. This time...

Was it worse, for her anger to be pointed at Hogwarts’ headmaster? Rather than some snot-nosed brats? Something about the difference felt baleful.

He wondered over this as they turned a corner.

Meanwhile, Poppy was still raving, “—he’s not even *listening* to us! Acting like he can’t use some of his influence to save a child—*an abused child, Severus!*—and fix the Chamber of Secrets at the same time.”

“I’m aware,” Severus said. He pinched the bridge of his nose. With how he’d been doing that lately, Severus was surprised he’d yet to bruise.

She shook her head, like he wasn’t aware at all. “I’ve been lenient with his methods in the past, but—”

Minerva held up a hand, and Poppy’s mouth snapped shut with an audible snap for the second time that day.

Severus turned an eye onto her, asking.

“Now isn’t the time. Nor the place,” Minerva said. She inclined her head towards the end of the hall, and both Poppy and Severus followed the gesture.

They’d just turned another corner, only this hall wasn’t as empty as the last.

Minerva sniffed and called, stern, “Mr. Weasley, good evening. I hope you know its rude to eavesdrop on a professor’s conversations.”

Standing at the end of the hall, pressed up against the corner like it might hide him, the usually poised Percy Weasley was watching them with wide eyes. He looked a little worse for wear at being caught. Severus was instantly on guard—and at once ready to snap. He whirled on the boy.

“How long have you been listening, boy?”

Percy jumped. He alternated staring between the three of them, looking for once out of his depths rather than irritatingly prefect-y. But then he shook himself, and had only a tight-lipped smile to offer. Severus clicked his tongue.

“Er... sorry, professors, matron. I was only just passing through—you haven’t seen my brothers, have you?”

“Fred and George?” Severus asked. “Thankfully, no.”

Minerva eyed Percy for a moment longer, like she didn’t quite believe him. But she quickly sobered. However, her tone was still severe enough to have leave most troublemakers shivering. “We haven’t. I trust you’ll be keeping those two out of trouble?”

“Of course!” Percy said. But then he cleared his throat, and amended, “I’ll try my best.”

Minerva nodded wordlessly.

Percy’s eyes flicked back to Poppy for only a second. “Is... everything okay, Ma’am?”

“Everything is fine,” Severus answered snappily.

Poppy patted him on the arm, and Severus grunted.

“Just a minor disagreement between the headmaster and myself. It’s nothing to worry yourself over, dear.” While her tone was light, there was a tightness to her expression. Severus knew that Poppy when she was angry was more akin to a wheelbarrow set loose than anything else. A pasted-on smile wouldn’t slow her.

No. She needed to get her hands dirty. Fix the problem herself with yelling or healing or what else.

Minerva must have known this as well, because she grimaced. To Percy, she asked, “Nothing happened while we were in our meeting, I trust? Regarding the petrifications, or anything else.”

“No, Ma’am.” Percy shook his head. “There have been no major incidences since Mr. Creevey.”

Poppy breathed out a heavy sigh at the mention of the petrified Gryffindor boy.

“Good,” Minerva said, voice edged with weariness. She turned a look onto Poppy and Severus. “With that settled, I’ll need to discuss a few things with Mr. Weasley, here. You two —” here, she pointed a particular look onto Poppy, who was still fuming visibly, “—stay out of trouble.”

Severus held up his hands glaringly. She didn’t need to tell *him* that. And honestly, the audacity to even suggest that...

Minerva bid them farewell, then walked down the hall towards Percy. She cast them a final look that seemed to say, *“we’ll talk more, later.”*

Then, Minerva and her prefect were gone.

Poppy and Severus stood mute for a moment, as if to truly guarantee they were alone this time. No one spoke for several seconds, and even the sound of footsteps was absent. Perfectly alone.

Severus bridged the gap of silence between them. “As expected, bringing our concerns to Albus was pointless."

“...not pointless.”

Severus raised a solitary brow. “I fail to see how. Without the headmaster’s endorsement, we have no legal footing to push forward on a case for Mr. Dazai.”

“Not that,” Poppy said, “No. Albus is utterly useless for that.”

Severus grunted. He had an inkling, and a guilty stinging that said he felt the same.

“He told us he wouldn’t help Mr. Dazai. He didn't say *we* couldn’t try, anyway.”

“What exactly are you proposing?”

“I won’t sit still any longer. And neither should you,” Poppy turned a determined glare onto a window, fogged over from the heat of a burning flame. “I’m going to see the situation for myself.”

Severus reeled.

“Sev, I’m going to Yokohama.”

“It’s dangerous,” Severus shot her down immediately. They didn’t know what was really going on there. Why they were being pushed away so forcefully. What Yokohama had to hide. “It could be dangerous.”

She frowned, serious. “You’ve been before, a few times. But that’s all the more reason for me to go—if it’s so dangerous, then Mr. Dazai shouldn’t be left there alone. I want to meet this Mori person for myself.”

Severus had to point out the obvious. “Their government will only turn you away.”

“Then I’ll sneak in.”

“You...” Again, Severus pinched his nose. The gesture ached and he let it. “That’s a bad idea, Poppy.”

“It’s the best idea we have,” she told him, severe.

And that was, terribly, true.

Their only other option was sitting still. Was waiting for something to turn around. Was doing nothing.

Like they had been, pointlessly, for over a year now.

While Dazai, Yokohama, and Albus cleverly danced around their concerns—leaving Severus and Poppy to watch on-and-on hoping the dance would some day come to an end.

“I’m going to put an end to this,” Poppy was telling him, “or at least put some effort into trying.”

An angry Poppy was a force to be reckoned with. Severus admired and feared her force at the same time.

He let out a breath. Resignation and hope mixed oddly in his stomach, feeling like a spell gone wrong. “I can’t come with you. The Malfoy Winter Ball is in a few days, and I have to be in attendance.”

“I know,” she said.

“I don’t like this.”

Poppy’s fists clenched at her sides, silently seething.

“I know.”

-

Dazai staggered to his feet, and stumbled several meters away. His feet were shaky with adrenaline. Pain—agonizing pain—bloomed behind his left eye. Dazai tried to smother the pain with his hand. It made a wet *slap* sound, and within a second the once-white lace of his sleeve was drenched red.

The scalpel—his eye—!

He lurched to a sudden stop by the window, where a sunset was turning the entire Yokohama sea a screaming crimson. Dazai whirled around.

During Dazai’s escape, Mori must have moved past him.

The doctor was now standing over Father’s bed. The bloody scalpel—wet with Dazai’s blood—had changed from Father’s hands to Mori’s.

Mori held it over Father’s neck.

Father had stopped moving, except for those awful gasps. Mori had one hand pressed firmly into his chest and holding him in place on the bed.

Dazai stared at them, but couldn’t make out either’s expressions. He was squinting against the pain, vision blackening at the edges. And his left eye was a mess of blood and wound. The hand still clamped over it did nothing to soothe the pain as blood coated the entire left half of his face and arm. The front of his dress almost completely red.

It splashed thickly against the floor.

Several drops swiftly followed. Within a few seconds, the sticky gore had pooled around one shoe.

Absurdly, all he could think in that moment was, *I won't be able to clean the blood out.*

Dazai blinked several times to clear his vision.

"Doctor..." Father said, *"...tell the executives to murder them all... the opposing organizations, the military police, my son... by sundown..."*

Red light filled the room. The sun was already dying.

"That's not a rational course of action," Mori said.

Father didn't hear him. Or wasn't listening.

"Kill them," he gasped. *"Kill them."*

Mori slowly released his hand. The boss wasn't struggling, now.

"Kill them."

Dazai's palm clenched over his bloody eye. It burned.

"Kill them."

His knees wobbled, and he wanted to sit down but couldn't.

"Kill him—"

Mori's hand jerked.

The scalpel sliced clean. A growing line of crimson along Father's throat.

A spurt of blood dyed his white blankets red. The wound bubbled.

Father finished gasping.

Then Mori said, with the voice of a clinician, "the boss has passed on due to his illness." He was still standing over Father—speaking to Dazai while speaking to a corpse. "He left word saying I will inherit his position as the boss."

Mori turned slowly to see him. Now his face, too, was splattered with blood.

And Dazai did not find himself at all surprised by this turn of events. He only thought about how much his eye hurt. About how strange Mori looked standing in red light.

"You're my witness." Mori stared. "Do you understand, Dazai?"

His name hung in the air, an echo.

Dazai.

The atmosphere between them was still and stale.

Dazai knew he was squinting and hunched over in pain—what a pathetic picture he must have made! But Mori was watching him now like Dazai was something important.

One of his chess pieces. One of the good ones.

“If you say so,” Dazai’s voice crumpled painfully, “Boss.”

Mori’s strange expression immediately morphed into one of his wide smiles. He clapped. In doing so, he tossed the scalpel to the floor. It made an awful metal sound, and blood spiraled out from where it landed. Mori paid it no heed.

“And look at your lovely dress. It's ruined, now. Though... I was right. White really is too pure for you, Dazai. You look much cuter in red,” he tutted, still beaming terribly. Mori crossed the room to stand over Dazai and inspect his eye. He grabbed Dazai’s wrist and pried it off the wound. A fresh spurt of blood answered and sluiced down Dazai’s already muddied cheek.

The white dress, red.

“Getting hurt like this, again. You’re always making trouble for yourself.”

Dazai wanted to turn away, but let Mori continue his ministrations instead. It hurt—but no more than it had with a hand clamped over it.

“Will I die?”

Mori hummed. He brushed a thumb just under the wound, but Dazai couldn’t see it.

His vision was distorted and black on that side. Dazai thought he should be worried, but instead seemed to be feeling nothing at all. Even his heart didn’t seem to be beating. Or it was beating so fast as to leave his entire body feeling numb and cold. He’d always been so awful with placing feelings like this.

“Don’t sound so optimistic,” Mori chided. “I’ll have you fixed up in no time.”

“Damn.”

"Though I may have to enucleate," he commented plainly.

Remove his eye, Dazai thought, a wash of nausea coming over him.

Mori laughed at whatever he saw in the un-bloodied half of Dazai’s expression. “You can’t go dying yet, Dazai. Port Mafia still has use of you.”

“At Hogwarts,” Dazai confirmed. He quickly pushed all thought of his eye to the very back of his mind. When Mori made a noise of assent, Dazai reached up to pull the doctor’s hand away. But Mori merely dropped his hand to rest on Dazai’s shoulder blade. “Where you’re planning to have me killed, anyway.”

“I’m planning for you to live a few years yet.” Mori’s other hand grabbed Dazai’s dry one.

This posing was familiar. From old lessons—when he was just a child, caught peeking around a secret corner during a Port Mafia mid-summer ball. Dazai was lucky Father hadn’t seen him. Father had been in better health, then, but was no less punishing. And the wounds Dazai would have received...

Instead, Mori had found him. Mori carted him back to his bedroom by the hand. Then asked, *“are you feeling antsy, Shuuji? How about I teach you the waltz? Next time the Boss hosts a party, perhaps he’ll let you join in the dancing.”*

Father hadn’t. And Dazai never really wanted to join, anyway. He’d only ever wanted to know what all the fuss was about.

But Dazai never forgot the steps Mori taught him that night.

He instinctively reached for Mori’s arm, just below the shoulder.

Mori moved to step. Dazai stepped with him.

Step one-two-three.

Their waltz was off-set, and had them revolving in a small, slow circle.

Slow, because Dazai’s knees were shaking. And he could only see half of Mori’s smile. And because a waltz could naturally be quite a slow dance when done in close quarters with a corpse.

The skirt of his dress flashed out prettily with every turn.

“You want the magical community to hate me,” Dazai said only after a minute of slow dancing. “Why?”

Mori stood over him, shadowing. Their next turning step was only a little awkward with their difference in height. “You’ve said it yourself. Come now—if you’re to be my favorite executive, you’ll need to be smarter than this.”

Dazai racked his brains. But all that answered was an aching, burning pain. “Your executive, *hmm?”* he asked instead.

“Usurping power from your father will make me some enemies among the others. But you won’t betray me. Loyalty like that should be rewarded, don’t you think? Besides that, you've been working for me over a year now. You're hardly fresh meat, Dazai.”

“That sounds like a lot of paperwork.”

“You’ll do it.”

Dazai fumbled his next step. Mori yanked him back upright. The force left Dazai’s head spinning, and by the time he recollected himself they’d revolved another four times.

“...And the Philosopher’s Stone?”

Mori hummed. “It serves a two-fold purpose. One,” his fingers massaged something into Dazai’s shoulder, “our enemies want it. If they want it, then *I* want it. And two,” they revolved again. “Well... how good are you with potions, my dear?”

Dazai tensed at the name, and hoped Mori didn’t notice. *But with how close they were...*

“Dreadful.”

“Then it doesn’t really concern you,” Mori told him.

Dazai scowled into Mori’s chest, and the doctor’s resulting laugh rumbled through him.

Something sick and noxious lingered in Dazai’s chest.

Fear. It was probably—

‘Fear is a wonderful motivator, you know.’

Oh.

Mori had said that before the year even began. And it had been echoing around in Dazai’s head ever since. A reminder of how to manipulate the people around him, or how to rationalize their behaviors. It hadn’t led him astray, yet. He leaned into that fear—threatened Milli and Tracey—to get them to deliver a message. Or pointed it in other directions—like when Dumbledore and Snape needed a ghost third-party to chase after.

Fear.

Dazai tried to meet Mori’s eyes, but his vision swam over red.

Instead, he said into Mori’s chest, “What are you trying to trick them into doing?”

Pressed so close to Mori, he could feel the doctor’s satisfaction rumbling in his lungs. It warmed Dazai’s face, and chilled the rest of him. “The magical community is full of fools,” Mori said. “No organization, no subtlety. That wizarding war they had several years ago is beginning to rear its head again.”

“Voldemort is a threat to Yokohama?”

“He’s nothing we couldn’t squash out, given time. But they’re all too noisy, these wizards. Entitled. No sense of restraint. You see, Dazai, Ability Users have a focus. Port Mafia controls Yokohama. That’s all we do, and we do it well. But wizards—Voldemort and

Dumbledore—don't know how to control themselves. All their fighting will only make trouble for us, down the line. Draw attention where it isn't wanted."

There was no music, but Dazai could hear the swell of violin in his ear, anyway. It pitched, then turned around with them, and did something low instead.

Mori pulled him in—a beat in triple time.

Dazai let himself be swung around numbly. "So you want to, what? Use me to destroy the entire magical community?"

"No, no. We're going to use you to *make them destroy themselves."*

A piano *tap-tap-tapped* with every swinging step.

Dazai had never played an instrument before. But he could imagine, with each dragging motion of his feet against the ground, a piano key slotted down. A metal bar chimed. A black key and a white key made a certain sound when hit together.

They spun in a circle.

"The thing is, Voldemort makes wizards afraid, but he's unreliable. He won't do what we want just by asking nicely. Your father tried that during the wizarding war, only to wind up betrayed. We can only rely on Voldemort's influence for so long."

They spun in a circle.

"But what about a *new* Dark Lord? A young *Demon Student,* worse than Voldemort by a hundred times. Enemy of wizards. Enemy of muggles. Enemy of Voldemort, even. *Dazai Osamu is pure evil,* everyone will think. Hysteria is quite a useful tool, my dear. So as long as you do what I say..."

They spun in a circle.

"They'll kill themselves, trying to kill you."

Revolving, and a coiling box-step.

As long as your legs didn't break, a waltz could go on forever.

Dazai thought that, now, with blood turning his face a muddy red. That his feet would carry on this dance forever. Mori leading and him trailing behind. Some people danced for fun, he knew. Or prestige. But like this, Dazai felt only like a puppet pulled along its strings. Bloody and ramshackle and waltzing still.

Mori smiled strangely down at him. A shadow you couldn't shake.

"Your assignemnt: make them all fear you. Just try not to get yourself killed or expelled while you're at it, *hm?"* A smile that pulled at the edges. A dance that didn't end. Mori crooned, "After all, you are the villain of this story, Dazai."

Their feet drew bloody circles upon the floor.

Twisting, tightening, coiling.

Like a snake around the rabbit’s throat.

Chapter End Notes

happy birthday and have a nice week, i hope

Waltz

Chapter Summary

The Malfoy Winter Ball.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The annual Malfoy Winter Ball officially welcomed guests at five P.M. on the last Saturday of December.

But the preparation for such an extravagant party actually took several laborious hours to set-up. At two, the kitchen staff began preparing meals. Juicy hams, glazed with honey and brown sugar, glistened in the oven's heat. Biscuits were kneaded and proofed several hours in advance. Alcohol was sorted and set, so guests could be served with ease upon arrival. Then at three, the ballroom was cleared. Tables were pushed to the sides, so guests would have room to dance and mingle. By four, the Malfoy family had donned their fanciest robes and pasted on their falsest smiles. Four-thirty had Narcissa Malfoy running their doorman through the guest list for the fourth time in as many hours. At four-forty-five, eager-to-please guests would slowly start to trickle in. Finally, five P.M. struck, and the party began in earnest.

Mori, Kouyou, and Dazai arrived no later than three-thirty.

The doorman wasn't at his post, yet, so they were faced instead with a sternly shut door. It was a grand doorway—ornate wood and a curling brass handle—and it towered over Dazai several heads. It was predictably locked, and their knock hadn't been answered now for several moments.

Dazai shivered against the cold. The back of his neck was freezing where Mori had trimmed his hair short a few night prior. His new coat was long, black, and stiff—Mori's hand-me-down and too long for it. But how he wore it draped over his shoulders offered little protection from the bitter winter cold. At least Mori hadn't asked him to wear a dress today. Those frilly, Victorian things offered even less protection from the weather.

He peered up at Mori, who was staring at the door like he expected it to open itself.

"You should have called ahead."

Mori hummed, apparently unconcerned.

"Freezing to death isn't terrible... but the frostbite will hurt," Dazai continued. "Can I break in through the window?"

Kouyou shot him an unimpressed look that Dazai received with a pout.

Admittedly, Dazai wasn't overly familiar with the red-haired woman. He'd seen her around. Heard some about her. But before a few days ago, he'd never been able to really speak with her. Though, Father was dead now, and Kouyou seemed about as pleased with that fact as Dazai was, so she wasn't all terrible. Besides, he ought to at least try to get along with his fellow executive.

"You're not allowed to die or break the window," Mori told him.

Dazai sighed, terribly aggrieved. Then, "Can Golden Demon break the window?"
"No," Kouyou said. She had one sleeve raised to cover her mouth, but Dazai got the impression she wasn't hiding a smile. To Mori, she intoned, "your protégé is rather uppity."

Dazai huffed.

Mori only smiled. "Even though it wasn't in an official capacity, Dazai has been acting on Port Mafia's behalf for over a year, now. Perhaps acting out is how he best gets results?" he mused lightly. "It's suiting, for one his age."

Kouyou nodded sagely. "A flower with thorns," she said. "You'd best clip them before you get cut."

Mori seemed unbothered by the comparison and advice both. He raised a fist to rap the door again, more insistent.

Knock-knock-knock-knock.

The sound echoed for a long few seconds.

Then, through the door Dazai heard the sound of hurrying steps pounding down the hall. Someone's shoes squeaked as they slid to a stop. A second later the door suddenly swung open.

A short, freckled girl wearing servant's robes panted and grasped the door frame for support.

"Damian, finally! I told you to fetch more wine an hour ago—Hhhh!"

A high-pitched whistle screamed through the air. It took Dazai a staggering amount of time to realize the servant had made that sound.

The girl—*Abby,* her name tag said—looked about to be sick.

"Guests?" She squeaked. *"Now?!* It's—it's not five *now,* is it?"

Mori smiled, consoling. "We're quite a bit early, actually."

Abby looked in no way reassured. In fact, she made another sound like tea kettle and looked dizzyingly close to passing out.

“We’ve come to speak with Malfoy Sr.,” Mori continued, probably also noticing they were about to lose their only help to an anxiety attack. “He’s expecting us. Did Lucius not say?”

“Oh.” Abby gaped. “No. No he didn’t. I’m—*thank Merlin.* I’m not ready at all for guests to start arriving, and the boss-man will yell at me again if don’t have all the wine and—and if this party doesn’t go off without a hitch, I’ll cry!”

“You’re already crying,” Dazai chirped unhelpfully.

Abby startled. She brought a hand up to her face to feel for tears, but only wound up smudging tears-wet mascara all across her cheek.

When it seemed like the servant was about to start tea-kettling again, Kouyou interjected.

“Why don’t you take some time to freshen up, girl? We can see ourselves in.”

Abby shook her head agitatedly. “No, that’s not really how it works. Richard has to sign you in—”

Kouyou patted her on the shoulder, and for a moment it looked like something had popped loose in Abby’s skull. She blinked forward dumbly for a second.

Then, “Right. You’re right, Ma’am. I look a mess. And I’m still crying, aren’t I? *Merlin...”* Abby rubbed exhaustively at her face until it was red all over. She took a step back into the mansion, and waved for them to come in. “I’m going to clean up. Please wait here, um..?”

Mori smiled. None of them gave their names.

“...right. I’ll... someone will be here shortly. Please don’t wander around.”

Abby scampered over from them and disappeared around the corner before Dazai could even say a goodbye.

When it was only the three mafiosos left, Kouyou quietly shut the door at their backs. Dazai warmed up almost immediately; judging by the stinging feeling in his brain, there were several charms in place keeping the Malfoy estate heated.

He rubbed the back of his neck and looked around.

The entryway could only be described as “grand.” It towered a full floor above him, with a massive window casting light across the floor. Various plants lined the hall, potted with gold trim. One of the plants curled a vine in-and-out as if waving hello. The painting above it—of some ancient Malfoy heritage, Dazai assumed—scowled down at them. Many other paintings lined the walls. Dazai recognized a few of them as being particularly famous.

The Malfoy mansion was expensive, for sure. But Dazai wasn’t convinced anyone actually lived here. Not in any capacity that mattered.

They only had to wait another few minutes before Lucius Malfoy swept angrily into the atrium.

Lucius' hair was done up in a messy-looking bun, like they'd disturbed him before he could finish combing it. And though his robes were expensive, they weren't especially fit for the famous Malfoy Winter Ball.

Lucius paused upon seeing his company. Shock briefly flitted across his face, before a serious look abruptly shuttered over it. He patted down his robes, fixed a strand of cast-off hair, then walked to them with a fixed kind of posture.

"Mori," Lucius said. "I wasn't expecting you."

He glanced to Kouyou, eyes clearly asking, and only barely considered Dazai's presence.

Kouyou introduced herself with a florid smile. "My name is Kouyou Ozaki. I'm an executive of the Port Mafia. We'll be working alongside one another, from now on."

"Miss Kouyou," he said, offering a hand to shake, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Kouyou ignored the gesture.

Lucius' lips twitched for just a second—irritation blink-and-you'll-miss-it fast.

He turned to Mori rather than comment on the rude response. "I'm afraid I will be quite busy today. Now is not a good time for you to be here."

Mori brushed him off. "Your winter party is today, we're well aware. That's precisely why we've come."

Lucius stiffened, and stared Mori down, appraising. He looked like he wanted to argue.

Mori didn't let him. "Come now, Lucius. My executive—" here, his palm clapped down on Dazai's shoulder, "—completed your little test already. Unless you'd like to discuss this test where anyone could overhear, I suggest you welcome us somewhere more private. An office, perhaps?"

Lucius' eyes followed Mori's hand to where Dazai was looking between them, acting bored. Something in his expression briefly flickered upon seeing Dazai's face, but he said nothing on the matter. And within the second, he had turned back to Mori.

"This is a highly irregular business practice," he grouched. "We can speak in my office after I fix my hair—"

"Now would be preferred."

Lucius blinked. For a second, Dazai wondered if he might snap at Mori or even try to hex him.

But that didn't happen, and instead Lucius simply bit out, "Fine. Follow me."

"Ah, thank you for your hospitality," Mori said, cheerfully. He patted Dazai's shoulder again. "Come along now."

“I’m coming,” Dazai grumbled back. Though Mori seemed only amused by his annoyance, he did pull his hand back. Dazai rolled his shoulders as they marched down a long corridor.

Again, the walls stretched above them. The tile squeaked at their every step. Everything from the paintings to the pillars to the ornate, carved oak doors seemed squeaky-clean. Artificial. Lucius walked ahead of them, his shoulders a stiff line. Loose clumps of hair swung messily over his back. This was the most disheveled Dazai had ever seen the Malfoy patriarch, and it was a sharp contrast to how he’d appeared in Daigon Alley.

Eventually, Lucius led them to his study.

Dazai observed the old oak bookshelves and the magical trinkets with an idle curiosity.

Lucius didn’t make to sit. No one had expected him to.

“Where is it, then?” he asked.

Standing guard at the door, Kouyou raised a solitary brow.

“Of course you’ll be wanting proof,” Mori agreed without complaint. He looked to Dazai. “Go ahead, then.”

When Lucius’ eyes snapped to him, Dazai made a slow show of reaching into his coat’s inner pocket. He fussed around with the fabric for an extra moment just to watch Lucius squirm. Only after that, did Dazai retrieve Riddle’s diary.

He held it up in show, but made no move to hand it over. “It wasn’t very difficult to get. Next time you want to test someone, you should make it something a little more challenging.”

Lucius stared at him for a long moment. And again, Dazai was struck with the impression that Lucius wanted little more than to curse him where he stood.

But he didn’t, of course. Lucius instead said, in a voice like he was chewing glass, “You are a very adroit child.”

“If you say so.” Dazai flapped the diary around haphazardly, and Lucius’ eyes bugged.” I’ll be keeping this.”

“Of course,” Mori said before Lucius could get a word in edgewise. “You’ve earned that fairly, just as you have the Philosopher’s Stone last year. And on that note, I think it’s time we truly got down to business.”

Lucius nodded gravely. The air suddenly felt thick with a tension that Dazai languished in.

“Your Port Mafia has proven itself the better horse to back, with the upcoming return of Lord Voldemort. The Malfoy family is prepared to offer its support in the upcoming years.”

“Yes, I should expect so. I was quite patient to take the time and win you over, Lucius. When I could have just as easily had you disposed of.”

Lucius' frazzled hair stuck out at odd angles, but his scowl wasn't flustered. "You've more than proven your strength, Mori. There's no need for threats now."

Mori laughed. "Of course not. We're on equal ground here, aren't we?"

They weren't. Mori was playing all the cards, and everyone here knew it. He'd proven already to be a formidable foe to Hogwarts and Death Eaters alike. Destroying the Malfoy name was well within his capabilities, if he so desired. Mori was standing on a mountain; Lucius was cracking on thin ice. Because what Mori wanted, the Port Mafia got. And threats never left his mouth accidentally.

Lucius was also aware of these facts, and thusly only answered a dry, "The Malfoy family and Port Mafia will achieve magnificent things together."

"Oh!" Mori clapped. Both Lucius and Dazai jumped at the sudden noise. "I've nearly forgotten. *'Port Mafia'*—that won't do."

Dazai sniffed. "You can't just change the name of the Port Mafia," he said.

"Not change," he lifted a finger in point. "Merely... obfuscate. 'Port Mafia' already has affiliations and connotations. We'll be infiltrating the core of magical society, and making a new name for ourselves. To keep things cleaner—to avoid drawing unnecessary questions—I'll give this operation a new name. Something your little magical community can find comfort in."

"Hence," Kouyou suddenly spoke up. She pushed off the wall, and everyone's eyes were at once drawn to her confident stride. The flowery sleeves of her kimono waved like fluttering cherry blossoms in spring. "My presence today. The face of this new, heroic 'Port Mafia' needs to be someone strong and charismatic. But more than that," she glanced to Dazai and Mori, "someone not already associated with the Demon Student."

Lucius' lip curled as he took in Kouyou in a new light. "You're their figurehead."

The insult hung in the air for only a second when—

Faster than even Dazai could see, Kouyou's blade was suddenly at Lucius' throat.

Lucius yelped.

He flinched backwards and stumbled into the desk.

A dozen papers fell off, scattering across the floor messily. A paperweight cracked on the tile.

"I wouldn't underestimate any one of us, Malfoy." Kouyou's voice had an edge to it just as sharp as her blade. She waited a second for Lucius' ghastly expression to clear of its initial shock, then sheathed her blade. "I may be acting as the face of this new Port Mafia branch, but I will act on my own judgements."

Mori nodded sagely—which seemed to startle Lucius even more than Kouyou's swordsmanship had. "Rightly so," he said. "My executives are a direct extension of me,

Lucius. I trust they can manage their own assignments."

Something turned in Dazai's stomach.

(A burnt letter sitting in Snape's desk, or a group of friends he *wasn't* too attached to.

Unbecoming.)

Dazai ignored it.

Meanwhile, Lucius looked ill from his close brush with death.

"This new branch, what's it called, then?" Dazai asked while Lucius scraped himself off of his desk. "Trying to think of a so-called 'heroic' name for the Port Mafia... I just can't do it."

Mori tutted. "Don't say that, Dazai! Port Mafia always has your best interest in mind!"

"That doesn't make it heroic," Dazai said. He watched as Lucius tried to shakily regain his ground. The man looked a mess—nothing like he'd been last time. Frankly, Lucius looked kind of pathetic. But some people—no matter how much they flaunted their wealth and prowess—just weren't cut out for mafia life. Lucius was probably one of those people, he thought. Too easily pushed around by real violence when it was shoved in his face. "That just makes it annoying."

"How cruel," Mori mused.

Dazai made a show of rolling his eye, and by the time he'd finished bullying Mori, Lucius had most entirely recollected himself. He tugged at the fray of his hair until it looked somewhat neater.

"As for this new branch of the Port Mafia, it will need to engender trust from the community, and immediately inform the public," Mori drew his voice into something it normally wasn't, "we are the heroes; the Demon Student is the villain. What better tool to take down an unruly student than the Department of Education?"

Dazai blinked.

Heroes and villains...

"You're naming your grand organization Department of Education?" his nose scrunched up in distaste. "That's lazy."

Mori chuckled. "It's *familiar*. Ordinary people find comfort in familiar things, Dazai."

Dazai shook his head—believing Mori's explanation, but still finding the title uninspired. He lifted his chin in thought. *"Department of Education..."* he tasted the name in his mouth.

"DOE, in short," Kouyou commented. "As though an innocent deer. But every fawn must walk a forest homed by wolves."

As though Port Mafia had ever been anything near to *innocent.*

But Dazai supposed that was rather the point.

DOE was an organization that you could trust. That wouldn't hurt you. But would eradicate the big-bad currently wreaking havoc upon Hogwarts.

Unbeknownst to the public, however, the Demon Student and their soon-to-be beloved Department of Education were one-and-the same. A multi-layered scheme to invite wizards to their own demise. Port Mafia was their own hero and their own villain. It tasted bitterly of one of Lockhart's manufactured evils.

Dazai's gloved fingers rubbed over the cover of his diary. He put it back in his coat, feeling unsatisfied.

Somewhere down the hall, a clock chimed four times.

He turned to Lucius, and the man looked eager to get moving. His grand winter ball was impending by one hour, and he still looked as though he'd just been threatened with a slow death. But he didn't move. Instead, he commented to the room like he was asking permission, "I'll need to be getting the servants organized, now, for your grand entrance, Miss Kouyou."

"It needn't be grand," she told him. "Act as though we were close friends."

Lucius twitched. "Of course."

"Before that," Mori interjected before Lucius could even think about leaving the office, "seeing as we'll be partners from now on, it seems only fair that you should carry your own weight."

Lucius eyed him. "How so? The Malfoy name alone will do its job in earning you trust. I assure you, once wizards catch wind I'm supporting your Department, they'll trust you implicitly."

"Yes, yes. I'm well aware of the reasons I sought you out, Lucius," Mori said. "But everyone needs to carry their own weight. Let's start with the most pertinent problem, shall we?"

Lucius looked so tense, Dazai half expected him to snap in two. But being under someone's thumb seemed to come almost naturally to him. Like Lucius was used to hunting down the top dog, then rolling over at their feet. "What did you have in mind?" He asked, voice tight.

Mori hummed. "That servant girl, Abby. She's seen the three of us together."

Lucius looked between them—Mori, Kouyou, and Dazai. Realization lit up his eyes. "She'll blow our operation... I can have her fired in minutes."

He took a step towards the door.

Mori stopped him with a raised hand. "I'm afraid that won't be enough."

Lucius' step staggered, and he wobbled back into place by the desk.

"She can still talk even if she doesn't work here," Dazai piped up. He rocked back on his heels, and watched as Lucius' expression twisted from determination, to wariness, then to...

He looked sick.

"Dispose of her," Mori concluded. "Half measures aren't tolerated in the Port Mafia."

The request hung in the air.

Lucius' expression shuttered closed immediately, a steel mask trapping over his face.

Dazai wondered if Lucius had expected the request—if that had been the reason for his attempted abrupt departure. Or if Lucius was truly surprised. Dazai had to believe it was the former, if only because murder couldn't really be unexpected with the Port Mafia. Just last year, Dazai himself had gotten blood on his hands.

"That servant is my staff," Lucius said tightly. "Just as you trust your executives, I trust—"

"You don't," Mori interrupted him, and Lucius' mouth clicked shut. "You don't trust them. More importantly, I don't trust them. Kill her by the end of the day, or Port Mafia will abandon the wizarding world to its losing battle against Voldemort."

Lucius twitched.

But before he could answer one way or the other, the study door suddenly swung open.

"Father, Mother is looking for—"

Everyone spun to face the door, where Draco Malfoy entered. He had frozen in place upon realizing he was intruding. His hair was so neatly combed as to look stiff. And he was wearing expensive-looking robes—black and fine with silver finishings all over it. A jeweled snake curled over his breast pocket. It seemed to be slithering in a tight circle, and Dazai realized that the robes must have an animation charm on them.

Draco blinked several times between them. At Lucius, who wore a stoic face but a bedraggled appearance. At Kouyou, ever beautiful. At Mori, smiling sharp and slick. At Dazai—

Draco's eyes widened. He stared at Dazai for several moments longer than he had even his own father. His entire expression twisted—confusion, panic, fear. Then, lightning fast, he scanned the other occupants again, as if trying to place their intentions.

Mori clapped, and again most of the room startled.

"Young Draco! I've heard so much about you from my ward," Mori chirped. When he gestured to Dazai, Draco's eyes alit with realization.

"...My apologies for interrupting."

Mori waved him off. “Nonsense. You’re just on time, actually.”

At Draco and Lucius’ looks of confusion, he explained, “Lucius and Kouyou should be preparing for the party now. Meanwhile, I’d like to take some time to look through your documents, Lucius.”

Lucius nodded. He stepped behind the desk to sort through what papers remained atop it, and looked vaguely relieved to have something to busy himself with. He bent low to pick a receipt off the floor.

Draco watched the exchange with wide, confused eyes.

“As for Dazai,” Mori continued unbothered, “I’m sure Draco can keep him occupied until the party is finished. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Lucius stood upright, papers clutched tightly in his hands. He stared at Mori for a long moment, like he was searching for a hidden threat in the boss’ words. Whether he found it or not, Lucius didn’t comment. He whirled on Draco, who stiffened. “Draco. Keep the Demon Student occupied.”

“I—” Draco looked to Dazai in question. Again, his eyes seemed to catch on Dazai’s face, panic marring the corners of his eyes. His voice was less than sure when he responded, “I’m meant to attend the party.”

“We both know you’ll run away halfway through, Draco,” Lucius tutted. Draco went stock-still, but Lucius paid it no heed. “At least this way, you’ll be useful.” He cast a quiet spell to unlock a drawer and pulled out a ledger. “I will explain your absence to the guests as a minor illness. Do not prove me a liar, and stay out of sight.”

“I won’t.”

Lucius looked up from his documents to meet Draco’s eyes. Then he nodded, evidently approving.

“We’ll be seeing to business, then,” Mori finished for them. “Have fun while we’re gone, Dazai!”

“Go away,” Dazai drawled.

Mori pretended to whine, then he led the group back out the office door. Kouyou eyed Dazai before following suite, while Lucius was looking between Draco and Dazai like he might be ill.

Dazai waved a cheery-looking goodbye that did nothing to assuage Lucius’ worries.

The door had only just clicked shut when Draco was suddenly bursting across the room and crashing into Dazai’s side.

The snake pin on Draco’s chest froze in place, the magic sapped out of it immediately upon contact. It stared down at the floor, still.

Dazai grunted and stumbled backwards several steps. “Draco, it hasn’t been that long—”

“What happened?!”

Dazai startled at the bleeding *panic* in Draco’s voice. He’d never heard the young Malfoy ever raise his voice so emotively. To hear it now had Dazai instinctively looking around the room, searching for threats.

But the room was entirely empty, save for them and the broken paperweight now making a minefield of the floor behind Lucius’ desk.

Draco was still staring at him, frenzied. His eyes were firmly locked the left side of Dazai’s face, swimming with questions and fear and—

Oh.

His eye. Right.

Dazai raised one hand to push Draco off of him. Draco obliged only half-a-step, and refused to budge any further. Dazai’s other hand went to face.

A thick roll of bandage and gauze covered the left half of his face. It was white, and pulled so taught that his hair stuck out at odd angles where the wrappings met. The gauze was padded to indicate it was covering up a fresh wound. Mori had been forced to clean his eye wound again just this morning, because Dazai had woken up to bloody sheets where the gauze had bled through.

Dazai dropped his hand. It didn’t make a difference for the pain—it would ache and sting whether he put pressure on it or not. He’d only neglected to consider that Draco might have something to say about it.

“Dazai,” Draco stressed hysterically, “What happened to your eye? Do I need to get a healer? Wait, no, my father would have gotten you one. *What happened?”*

Dazai took a breath, willing Draco to relax. When he didn’t, Dazai knew he’d have to explain eventually. If *Draco* wasn’t going to let things lie, the *twins* were going to be insufferable come second semester. “Just a minor wound. Unfortunately, it’s not enough to kill me.”

‘Minor’ was not the right word, as Mori had been forced to remove the eye altogether. The surgery had been long, but Dazai had been asleep for most of it. Now, it was just bloodying bandages, and a hollow-feeling ache. A hole in his head like a gunshot. An empty socket.

Mori had cared for the wound gently, regardless. *Don't let this get infected now,* he’d said. Then he’d commented that an eyepatch would make Dazai look like a real mafioso. He'd then given Dazai an ointment to apply on mostly-undamaged eyelid, that Dazai had promptly thrown away. But Draco didn’t really need the specifics, and talking about it only made the pain more tangible.

The discomfort must have been visible on Dazai’s face, because Draco finally took another step back.

“That’s a lot of bandages for something minor,” Draco said, the familiar twist of condescension in his voice now. “Show me.”

“If I take them off, you’ll have to put them back on. Do you know how?"

Draco sniffed. “No... but I’ve seen the healing spell done before.”

“That spell doesn’t work on me,” Dazai reminded him, and Draco deflated. “It’s fine, Draco. Mori is a doctor, and he won’t go letting me die from something like this. Anyway—”

“Mori,” Draco interjected. Dazai raised a brow. “That’s who was just here, right? The guy. He’s your boss?”

Draco was squinting at the door, like perhaps he expected Port Mafia’s boss to come strolling in at any moment. Dazai followed his gaze. The door stayed resolutely shut.

“Yup,” Dazai popped. *“Ah...* you know you can’t tell anyone we’re here, right? Otherwise, we’ll have a problem.”

The girl Lucius was going to have to kill. Abby’s quivering face briefly flashed through Dazai’s mind. He looked at Draco and saw Abby’s face superimposed there. It turned something in his stomach.

“Obviously I know that, Dazai.”

“Just checking!” Dazai said, faux-cheery. Draco raised a brow, evidently not believing his ruse. “Say, that party of yours is going to keep us locked in here all night. Don’t you have any games we can play?”

“In my father’s office?” Draco asked bitingly. “No. And we aren’t going to be playing games, Dazai. You’re going to tell me what’s going on! What happened to your face, why your boss is here, who that lady was.”

Dazai snorted. “I’m going to tell you all of that, am I?”

“Yes,” Draco said matter-of-fact. Then, he tacked on as a clear afterthought, “Boss."

“Boring,” Dazai told him.

Draco’s face did something uncomfortable. “I thought we were supposed to be a team here, Boss. Don’t tell me you’re going back to keeping me in the dark. I’ll...”

“You’ll what?”

Draco snapped, and Dazai watched as malicious determination suddenly burst across his face. “I’ll sick Blaise on you!”

Dazai stilled. “...you wouldn’t do that. He’s unbearable when he wants something from you.”

Dazai remembered their meeting during the Quidditch match, or their midnight conversation the year prior. Probing and prodding and so earnest it was sickening. Blaise was too genuine for heartfelt discussion, Dazai thought. It made the whole affair too uncomfortable. And unfortunately difficult to truly avoid for long.

“I’ll tell the twins, too.” Draco puffed his chest out. He’d already counted his victory, clearly. And Dazai, reluctant, had to give it to him.

The twins would—and had, in the past—bodily drag Dazai into opening up.

“My subordinates are all so mean to me,” he whined.

Draco grinned, triumphant. But that satisfaction lasted for only a moment before Draco recalled what information he was asking after. He sobered up, and tried again. “Explain everything, Dazai. I can help.”

“I know you can,” Dazai said absently, knowing it would endear Draco. It did, and Draco’s lips twitched upwards in response. “But let’s sit down first. My eye hurts, and if I fall over and crack my skull, Mori will yell at me.”

-

Gilderoy Lockhart shined wherever he went—he really couldn’t help but to be so charming. He was wearing his most sparkling robes to emphasize this fact. They dazzled whenever he spun, and everyone’s eyes were always on him.

And the Malfoy Winter Ball... if ever a place needed him!

For all the dancing and chatting, the whole affair was awfully drab. The decorations were plain. The conversation strictly political (and not the fun kind, either! No one was even talking about him!). The food was delicious, but it would stain his robes if he wasn’t careful.

Terrible! An awful party!

Luckily for everyone, Gilderoy had finally arrived! He was only half-an-hour late due to a horrific incident involving a separate set of sequin robes and an ill-placed mud puddle. But no one had seen the resulting mess except for Gilderoy himself, so it may as well not have really happened. These bedazzled robes fit the occasion much better, anyway.

The ballroom was packed full of influential people and wannabe-influential people. Gilderoy masterfully maneuvered around the boring ones. He only had eyes for the best! Luckily, no one got in his way, and he didn’t have to shove off any pushy fans.

In fact, everyone seemed to be giving him a fairly wide berth.

Ah... the plight of an unapproachable celebrity! He was honestly a little lonely for it, if only because he'd practiced signing his autograph all last night. What a shame if he didn't even get to use it today. These poor fools must have felt so nervous in his presence, they couldn't even bring themselves to say hello. Gilderoy took pity and each and every one of them.

Un-swayed, Gilderoy searched across the ballroom floor for where all the important people had gathered. It took some looking, because all the guests had quite expensive robes on. But after nearly a full minute, Gildeory finally spotted his targets.

"Minister!" Gilderoy called cheerfully as he strode across the room. Several people hastened to dodge him, and one cluster of dancing elites even paused in their waltzing to let him pass. "Cornelius, I've just been looking for you!"

The Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, presided over the entire magical community. He was precisely the type of person Gilderoy should be in cahoots with! After all, their prestige was about equal.

Cornelius jumped, evidently not having seen Gilderoy's fast approach. Gilderoy clapped him on the back. Cornelius laughed tightly.

"Gilderoy, it's lovely to see you," Cornelius greeted as he gently pried himself off of Gilderoy's side.

"Great. He found us," Barnabas Cuffe—editor-in-chief of the Daily Prophet—grumbled dryly. Upon seeing Gilderoy's eyes on him, he cleared his throat and greeted, "good day, Gilderoy."

"Good day indeed, now I'm here! Though you didn't make it easy to find you all. What are you all doing huddled back here?" He gestured to their surroundings. For whatever reason, Cornelius' little group had gathered at the far end of the ballroom. He'd had to dig through entire swarms of party-goers to even catch a glimpse of them!

Cornelius cleared his throat, looking away briefly. "Just happenstance."

"I'm sure," Gilderoy nodded. Then, he finally turned his gaze onto the conversation's other two occupants. "Good day, Lucius. And... now I know I wouldn't forget a beautiful face such as yours, my lady. Who might this be?"

Standing beside Lucius was a woman Gilderoy had never seen before. She was quite beautiful—long, fiery hair pinned up in an elaborate bun. Her attire was flowery, and Gilderoy internally committed himself to finding out where she bought such a lovely outfit. Her make-up was done in such a way that the woman's eyes had become piercing. He met her stare. She was a good inch taller than him.

"Kouyou Ozaki," the alluring woman introduced. "Chairperson for the Department of Education. I've heard wonderful things about you, Gilderoy Lockhart."

Gilderoy beamed. A fan! "A board of education, I didn't realize we had one of those."

“We didn’t,” Lucius told him. “Before now.”

“And a good thing we do,” Cornelius said, sounding excited, “with all this awful business at Hogwarts, there’s finally a group stepping up to clean the place out!”

“Is that not your job, Minister?” Barnabas commented idly. Cornelius shot him a glare that Barnabas seemed entirely nonplussed by.

Gilderoy ignored them, all eyes on this mysterious Kouyou, now. *“Oh!* Those awful petrifications, yes. You know, I’m certain the culprit is that awful Demon Student. I’m a teacher at Hogwarts myself, you know. He’s always up to no good. But Albus has blocked all my attempts to have the boy expelled!”

Kouyou hummed, and though her expression barely changed, Gilderoy was certain she was shocked over this revelation. *“Oh,* dear. We can’t let rowdy students run around as such, lest they become another dark lord.”

Cornelius paled. “You think Dazai Osamu will take after H-he Who Shall Not Be Named?”

“It’s only to be expected, isn’t it?” Kouyou asked them. “My organization aims to take care of problems like this, before they get too out of hand.” She turned to Gilderoy. “And it sounds as though you share our interests, professor. Perhaps you might like to join the Department of Education in our fight against evil.”

A job offering! On site! Gilderoy’s robes dazzled, and so did he. Fame and fortune weren’t everything—people adored him because they knew he was just!

Gilderoy preened. “I *am* a champion of the people, you know. With me at your side, I’m sure the Demon Student will be defeated swiftly!”

Kouyou offered a light laugh.

“Miss Kouyou is right,” Barnabas said. “Albus has become complacent.”

“Now, I wouldn’t say that...” Cornelius trailed.

“I would!” Lockhart said, upon seeing how Kouyou seemed to react agreeably to the sentiment. “There’s a demon at Hogwarts, and he’s done nothing about it.”

“For once we agree,” Lucius droned. “Albus is too full of himself. He forgets it is our children who are in danger.”

Everyone nodded, though Gilderoy was fairly sure none of them but Lucius actually had children.

“Still,” Cornelius hemmed-and-hawed. “I trust Albus. Surely, he has a plan for that boy.”

Barnabas snorted. “Nonsense. He’s just afraid that expelling the only muggle-born student in Slytherin will have him labeled a blood purist.”

Cornelius paused at that, genuinely considering the theory. He looked away. “He does have those notions, doesn’t he...”

Lucius scoffed, but offered nothing more on the subject.

Similarly, Gilderoy also held his tongue. Because waxing poetic about unity between muggle-borns and pure-bloods was all well-and-good when in the right audience. His younger fans usually lapped the equality spiel up. But he couldn’t be seen supporting such things here! He wisely nodded along instead.

“What a shame,” Kouyou said somberly. “If only Hogwarts’ headmaster were more conscious of the people’s worries.” She looked pointedly at Cornelius. “How has your approval rating been since all this started, Cornelius?”

He blinked, looking put on the spot. The slump of his shoulders was his only answer.

Kouyou nodded, seeming to have expected as much. “As I thought, the public would be much happier if they knew something was actually being done about this Demon Student. Cornelius, I have a proposition for you.”

Cornelius perked up.

“If you publicly show support for the Department of Education, I’m certain your approval ratings will increase. It will also give me the traction I need to eliminate your demon problem.”

Cornelius blinked several times as he took that in. “I... that *would* benefit everyone, wouldn’t it?”

Gilderoy bobbled in place, liking the idea terribly. “As a member of your Department, surely I’ll be mentioned during this announcement?”

“Of course,” Kouyou smiled.

“I could write the article myself,” Barnabas said as he stroked his chin. “A message from the Minister himself regarding the Demon Student is sure to sell copies.” He shook himself, and turned a considering eye onto Kouyou. “But what exactly does the Department of Education *do?* You can’t simply waltz into Hogwarts and take the demon out.”

Kouyou tittered. “Leave the logistics to me. As it stands, your readers don’t want to know the nitty-gritty details of the *real world.* They just want everything to remain as it always has been—peaceful. DOE can do that for you.”

Cornelius nodded along, emphatic now. “It’s just so!”

"What’s *just so?”*

Everyone’s eyes snapped to the new voice.

Severus was watching them with a critical eye. Even though he'd inserted himself into their conversation, he was standing a good foot outside the traditional space for conversation. Like he didn't really want to be here, but couldn't hold back his curiosity.

Gilderoy tutted at him. "Now, Severus. No need to look so glum. If you wanted to talk with me, you should have just said!"

Severus' lip curled. "I'm greeting the host," he said. "You just happen to be nearby." He turned an eye onto Lucius. "Good evening, Lucius. The Malfoy Ball is as extravagant as ever."

"I should hope so," Lucius intoned familiarly. "You're late."

"It's packed in here. I've only just found you."

Barnabas sniffed. "Gilderoy found us just fine."

"Gilderoy is always showing up when you least expect him," Severus said, sounding aggrieved. Then, he lifted a fluted champagne glass. "I was getting something to drink."

"Brilliant idea," Barnabas said, nodding stiffly. Then, without saying a word further, he dove into the crowd in search of drink.

They stared after him for a long, awkward moment. But the editor-in-chief showed no sign of returning, and had very suddenly vanished into the masses of dancing socialites.

Drat. Gilderoy had been hoping to talk to Barnabas about getting him a front-page article.

"Did I chase him off?" Severus asked, not sounding bothered by the prospect.

"You *are* rather boorish," Gilderoy told him.

Severus glowered. "Perhaps I should go after him to apologize." Already, Severus had taken a step away from them.

Gilderoy snatched his robe sleeve, stopping Severus in place. "Nonsense! You've only just arrived."

Severus stared longingly in the direction of the drinks table.

Lucius shot him a pointed look, and Severus deflated in place. All the fight melted out of his mien.

"Fine," he ground out.

"Ah..." Cornelius rubbed a hand nervously over the back of his neck as he tried to dispel the awkward air. "Severus, have you met Kouyou? I believe we'll be seeing a lot of her to come."

Severus' eyes immediately went to Kouyou, having easily identified her as the odd-one-out among them. "I haven't."

"Let me introduce you to our new friend, then!"

As conversation warmed back up around them, Lucius basked in the glow of attention. A new side-kick in his fight against the Demon Student—how wonderful was that? Every good hero needed a second-in-command. And this would certainly make for a worthy chapter in his next novel! With some embellishment, of course...

Gilderoy was so invested in his inspired thoughts, he hardly noticed the furrow of Severus' brow digging deeper and deeper the more Kouyou spoke.

-

Draco, after hearing Dazai's explanation, had only stared at him in silence for a long moment. He stared at Dazai, at the door, at the bookshelves. It was lucky they were sitting on the floor, because Draco looked so dazed as to be dizzy. His whole face was scrunched together uncomfortably.

"So you..." Draco finally said after a distinct pause, "...your boss always wanted people to hate you? To villainize you?"

Dazai himself hadn't been able to bask in the audacity of Mori's scheme (too busy living it himself). So he appreciated Draco's reaction. There was a small amount of comfort in knowing that even just one person was on his side. Even if that *was* a terribly childish thought.

Of course, Draco still didn't have the full picture. Dazai had naturally omitted Speical Abilites from his explanation without forethought. He'd also neglected to mention the recent death of his father.

"It's a good thing I'm so adept at causing trouble," Dazai said. Tucked in his sleeves, he had been absentmindedly pricking his fingers on the edge of his knife for several minutes now. It stung but didn't draw blood. "Since Mori was so tight-lipped on this plan of his. What if I'd made a lot of friends first year, *hm?* What if everyone loved me? That would've been funny."

"You did make friends," Draco told him pointedly, to which Dazai shrugged.

"Anyway, now that things are official, we're just paying our good Malfoy friends a visit!" Dazai returned the knife to its pocket. He gestured to the Malfoy estate around them. "Thank you for your hospitality," he dipped his head in mock respect.

“And those two...” Draco said, thinking of Mori and Kouyou, who had wandered off hours ago and had yet to return.

“Off schmoozing, I’m sure.”

Well, Kouyou was. Mori was probably tucked in a back room, somewhere, flipping through illicit documents. But, forgetting them...

“You didn’t say about your eye.”

Dazai blinked. “Didn’t I?”

“No,” Draco said. Then he asked, like he was afraid to hear the answer, “Your boss didn’t do that, did he?”

“There’s nothing to be done about it, if he did,” Dazai said, almost laughing at the image of some nobody picking a fight with the Port Mafia boss over something so trivial. They’d find themself dead within the week! “But, no. He didn’t.”

Dazai didn’t expand further. And though Draco’s eyes were still on him, clearly wary, he didn’t ask again.

“Well!” Dazai clapped.

Draco raised a brow.

“With that out of the way, I’ve got to consider what comes next. Mori hasn’t given me any new assignments yet. Nothing specific, at least.” With the diary tucked safely in Dazai’s pocket, Lucius' test was officially history. But other than keeping up this Demon Student façade, Mori had said nothing more on what Dazai should be doing at Hogwarts. “What else is fun to do at school?”

Draco watched him for a moment, visibly still uneasy with what Dazai had told him. But he shook it off rather quickly, and readjusted so he was sitting at Dazai’s side rather than in front of him. Their shoulders touched.

“Not to sound like Hermione,” Draco intoned, “but you could always study.”

“That’s a good idea,” Dazai agreed.

Draco startled and stared at him. “What? No it isn't. You don’t do homework. Are you *sure* you don’t need a healer?”

Dazai laughed, then brought a hand mockingly to his head. “It’s an eye wound, Draco. The scalpel never even got close to my brain.”

Draco silently mouthed the word *‘scalpel,'* looking vaguely ill.

“And I didn’t mean homework, obviously. I mean the Chamber of Secrets.”

Draco paused at that. His brows furrowed. “Did you ever figure out what the Chamber is?”

“No clue. I didn’t find anything in the library,” Dazai told him. He’d only ever seen the name once: written beside Mrs. Norris’ petrified body. The full message, written in still-wet blood, Dazai remembered to have been,

‘THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.’

Which really raised a lot of questions. What is the Chamber of Secrets? Why was it closed? Who is this ‘heir?’ And then, of course, was the staff’s unusual reaction to the petrifications in the first place. Dazai was curious, and wanted to know exactly what was going on in his school. Luckily, he had the perfect lead currently taking up space in his robe pocket.

Tom Riddle would surely have something of interest to share with him.

“It seemed unimportant at the time, in light of everything else. But if I have some free time...” Dazai trailed off, indicating that he would surely be up to no good.

Draco made a disapproving sound that Dazai ignored. “Should you really be making more trouble for yourself?”

“If anything, that’s *exactly* what I should be doing,” Dazai said, thinking of Mori’s plan. “No need to look so disgruntled, Draco. You don’t even have to tag along this time. With Mori and Lucius on the same side now, there’s no need for you to dirty your hands with this Chamber business. It’s only a personal project of mine.”

Draco’s face did something curious. It twisted painfully, and he looked away when he couldn’t mask over it.

“...I don’t mind helping.”

“The more the merrier, then.” And Dazai decided, “Of course, Blaise will want to play, too.”

Draco snorted at that.

Dazai was about to chide him for laughing at their friend, when something suddenly pricked his ears. A noise right outside the room. It didn’t sound like Mori, but everything was too muffled to tell. Dazai stilled. Draco quickly followed suit.

Then, Draco turned a critical eye onto him. “What?”

“Shh!”

Draco paused obediently for all of a second, before snapping, “Excuse you? Don’t *shush* me.”

“Someone is here,” Dazai told him. And that really shut Draco up. “Don’t you hear that?”

Draco leaned forward, straining his ears. He was squinting at the door, where Dazai was indicating the source of the noise to be.

“I don’t hear—”

“It sounds like—”

Slowly—ever so slowly—the door creaked open.

Dazai and Draco went silent immediately.

Without hesitation, Draco shot to his feet and threw his arm out over. His cloak drew out in a long swath of fabric that presumably hid Dazai from view. Not wanting to blow his cover, Dazai allowed himself to duck behind it.

He waited in tense silence.

Then—

“Draco, what in the world are you doing in here?” Pansy asked. “We’ve been looking everywhere.”

“I thought you might be in your room,” Blaise suggested. “We were checking random doors.”

Dazai perked up immediately upon hearing his friend’s voice.

Blaise! Of course Blaise was at this stupid Malfoy party. Dazai fought the urge to stand up and greet him. But, unfortunately...

“What’s that look?” Pansy asked. “You look sick. Is that why you’re hiding here without us?”

Pansy. *Ugh.*

“Yes,” Draco said too quickly. “That’s exactly it!”

“You’re not good at lying,” Blaise told him.

“...Don’t say that.”

Dazai heard fabric shuffling, like someone had shrugged.

“Whatever,” Draco said, arm still held out awkwardly. “You two need to leave. I’m doing important Malfoy business in here, and we’ll all be in deep trouble in you see.”

Pansy scoffed.

“’See?’ You mean whatever it is you’re hiding behind your robes?” Blaise paused, then said, appallingly, “we can close our eyes.”

“Blaise...” Draco warned.

“Come on, Draco,” Pansy said. Her voice was closer now. “At least pass the time with us. Malfoy parties are so boring without you.”

“I’m serious, you two. Get—*hey!”*

Pansy and Blaise’s heads popped up over Draco’s shoulders.

Dazai waved sheepishly.

They peered down at him, wide-eyed. Pansy’s mouth dropped open in shock and horror. She looked Dazai up-and-down, then started spluttering like a fish. Meanwhile, Blaise’s surprise had almost immediately melted into something more controlled and contemplative. There was a furrow to his brow that said he didn’t like whatever he was thinking. It had Dazai instinctively wanting to take up a more defensive position.

“Dazai!?” Pansy screeched. *“Wh—how?!”*

Blaise had no such exclamations. The very second Draco stepped aside, Blaise dropped to his knees. He cradled Dazai’s cheek, and stared at the eyepatch with great dismay.

“You’re hurt,” he said. “Is it healed?”

Dazai leaned into Blaise’s hand for only a short, indulgent second. Then he swatted the hand back. Blaise pulled away freely. “It’s fine. Didn't even get close to killing me, unfortunately," he said hollowly.

Blaise opened his mouth to say something more.

“What in Merlin’s name is going on here?” Pansy demanded. Blaise shot her an unusually scathing look before turning back to his examination of Dazai’s face. “Draco, why is—*how is he here?”*

Draco paled considerably—a feat in itself for the already pallid boy. He whirled on Dazai, expression screaming, *what now?*

Dazai considered his options for a moment.

Blaise wasn’t really a problem. Dazai would probably have told him about the Malfoy party eventually, anyway. Though he was going to have to chase Blaise out of here before Mori showed back up. The real issue was Pansy, who Dazai was sure would blow his cover if she thought it would hurt him.

Dazai’s eye dragged from Pansy to Draco.

“Draco—”

“Is it too easy to say I slipped in through the window?” Dazai asked as he stood up. Pansy glared at him like she didn’t believe a word he said now, and never had in the past, either. “Didn’t think so.”

After a second, Blaise also rose. Notably, he was standing at Dazai's side rather than Pansy's. And with Draco still standing protectively in front of Dazai, Pansy was secluded in her half of the room.

Clearly, this observation hadn't escaped her notice. Her glare flickered briefly into something less sure. But it was back in full force within the second. Pansy didn't take her bristling glare off of Dazai when she said, "When your father finds out he's here, you'll be in deep shit, Draco."

Draco looked away, guilty.

"Let me kick him out," Pansy continued, not oblivious to Draco's changing mood, but also not truly understanding it. "For whatever reason, you like him and won't do it yourself. I have no such compunctions."

"That's a bad idea," Dazai told her.

At the exact same second, Draco hastily said, "my father knows he's here."

Pansy blinked several times. The caustic point of her expression suddenly slipped into bewilderment. "He *knows?* And you're all still in one piece?!"

Blaise's expression did something similar. But rather than settling on bafflement, realization dawned across his face. Now looking at them with new eyes, Blaise surveyed the scene carefully. When his eyes found the broken paperweight, they narrowed.

"It's complicated," Draco stressed. "And not something you're meant to know about. Not something *anyone* is meant to know about."

Pansy finally managed to shut her hanging jaw. "That's why you weren't at the party. You can't be seen together... but then... I don't understand."

"It's business," Dazai told her simply. Pansy whirled on him. He narrowed his gaze on her, mentally calculating where he should go with this. Dazai supposed he could kill her. He'd make it quick, too. Before the end of the party—or at the start of next semester, maybe—a slice to the carotid...

But...

He clearly remembered what Blaise's reflection had shown in the Mirror of Erised. A reflection of *all* of them. Pansy included. So... killing Pansy would upset him, surely.

Dazai shook his head, dislodging that pesky thought. No... he couldn't just kill her. Even if it was the easiest solution—and certainly the one Mori would choose. Blaise's loyalty was more important. Mori had to understand the logic in that, certainly.

He glanced to Blaise, wondering if the boy had read his intentions.

Blaise stared back at him blankly.

So why did this have Dazai's feeling wrong-footed?

He brushed it off, choosing to dwell on the anxiety never. "Let's put this in terms Pansy can understand," Dazai said in a way that had Pansy snarling. "It's in Draco's best interest if you leave now, and never tell anyone I was here."

"You don't know what's best for him," Pansy growled. She took a step forward that Dazai tried-and-failed to halt by raising a hand. "I'm throwing you out."

"Ah... see, this is why I don't like you," Dazai muttered, forced back several steps by Pansy's approach. "You're incapable of listening to reason."

"Then start making sense." Pansy stomped to him.

When Blaise stepped between them, however, Pansy finally stopped.

"What is *wrong* with all of you!?" Pansy squawked. She flipped between the three of them, emphatic. "He's a demon! I've been telling you for *two years now* that he only makes things worse! Can't you just listen to me for once! You've both become... become soft!"

Blaise stared at her, nonplussed.

But Draco whirled on her, suddenly looking angry. The switch from quietly guilty to indignant had Dazai raising a brow.

"Maybe I want that!" Draco spat, and Pansy staggered back a step, aghast. "Talking with who I want, regardless of what my father says. Regardless of what you—or anyone thinks."

Pansy stared, devastation clear across her face.

Blaise cleared his throat, aiming to pacify. "We had fun first year. All four of us."

"Loyalty Club," Pansy said the words like they were acid. "We weren't friends."

"You were. Begrudgingly," Blaise said. "The kind of friends who bicker all the time."

"Ew," Pansy and Dazai whined at the same time. They quickly looked to each other at the incident.

"See? Friends."

"Even if Dazai is up to no good..." Draco continued. Then, he shook his head, like that thought shouldn't be said aloud. "Anyway, this isn't like that. Father asked me to stay with him."

Pansy, again, gaped. Her eyes nervously flicked towards the door, possibly anticipating Lucius' abrupt presence. And though Lucius was still busy in the ballroom, Mori would have no such occupation. Dazai didn't doubt the boss could show up at any moment. They were lucky he hadn't already.

Best to hasten this along, then. Lest Mori see Pansy and Blaise with him and decide permanent actions needed to be taken.

Thinking this, Dazai elbowed Draco in the side. There was no way Pansy was going to listen to him—but she would absolutely hear Draco out. Draco gave him an odd look, which Dazai returned with a stare he hoped would impress the urgency of their situation.

“You know my father likes to play politics,” Draco said, presumably reading Dazai’s intentions. When Pansy nodded, still blatantly suspicious, he continued, “Dazai is a part of his latest job. But if he knows you know...”

Pansy stared, then her face did something distraught. And when she spoke, betrayal was thick in her tone. “You didn’t tell us.”

Draco’s expression steeled. “I didn’t tell anyone.”

Pansy turned to Blaise, indignant, only to see—

Blaise was back to watching Dazai, squinting at the wound like he bore it himself. His demeanor belied no shock nor betrayal as Pansy’s had.

When Pansy saw this, her mien crumpled further.

Dazai had never seen Pansy like this before—not angry or spitting or superior. She looked like she wanted to collapse in place, strings cut. Her eyes wet at the corners.

“You knew too, Blaise?” Pansy choked.

Blaise finally glanced at her, and though he looked somewhat guilty, he didn’t explain himself.

Pansy took another step back. Then another. She was looking desperately between Draco and Blaise. “I do so much for you two. We hide away at parties and make fun of Gryffindors together. I comfort you when your father is awful, Draco—or when you're bored, Blaise. I don’t... We’re friends! You don’t tell me anything!”

Draco looked away again. His eyes found broken shards on the floor, and his fingers twitched like he should pick them. He stayed stiffly in place. A statue petrified in its own right.

Blaise made a displeased sound. “You’ve made your stance on Dazai clear, Pansy. You know we couldn’t have told you about this.”

“You should have!” Pansy spat furiously. Tears leaked out from her eyes and she made no move to clear them. “You know what everyone says about Dazai. I’m watching out for you! It doesn't matter how any of us *feel!* We make the friends our families want us to make and ignore everyone else! Why can't I make you remember that?! Why can't I make you want to stay friends with *me?!*”

“Pansy—” Draco tried.

“No, I’ve had it!” She shook. “I try to keep your names clean, and all you do is hide things from me. You don’t trust me at all, even though...”

Blaise pulled away from Dazai’s side, intent on offering a hand to Pansy.

But Pansy was having none of it. Her face was red and wet with tears. And when she took another step back to the door, Blaise’s reach just barely missed her.

“Ah, that’s enough already,” Pansy cried weakly. “You’re all awful. Maybe you deserve to be ruined.”

Without another word, she turned and ran straight out the door.

It hung ajar at her back, swaying lifelessly from the force of her departure.

“Bah... she stormed off just like that,” Dazai commented lightly.

Blaise shot him a significant look that Dazai couldn’t make heads-nor-tails of before declaring to the room, “I’m going after her.”

He had already taken several steps to the door when Draco began to follow. “Me too—”

“No,” Blaise stopped him. “I thought you had to stay with Dazai.”

Draco sneered. “You don’t give me orders.”

Blaise didn’t respond to that except to incline his chin. Draco’s fingers twitched uselessly at his sides. And when Blaise turned again to leave, Draco stayed firmly rooted in place. Blaise’s footfalls were running as he left down the hall.

While Draco stared blankly—yearningly—at the still-open door, Dazai mentally patted himself on the back. Pansy was still alive and Blaise would surely keep her from spilling the beans about his presence. Moreover, the office was empty once again save for Draco and himself. Mori would be none-the-wiser.

“Hmm... looks like everything worked out,” Dazai commented, pleased.

Draco didn’t meet his eyes.

-

Severus didn’t particularly care for alcohol. He’d never found any sweet enough for his liking, and as such rarely engaged with it. At parties, he would only grab a glass to be polite.

It'd go to waste in his hand, and by the end of the evening inevitably wind up dumped into some poor potted plant.

Lucius, who knew this fact well, raised a knowing brow when Severus excused himself, "Pardon me. I'll get another drink now."

The plant beside them was looking a little sickly, and possibly somewhat buzzed.

Luckily, no one called him on his lie. Severus managed to slip away from the group without fuss. Only Gilderoy called after him, but Severus had started tuning the man out several dozen minutes prior. It was no trouble now to simply pretend he hadn't heard.

Severus pushed through the crowd with relative ease—most of the partygoers were dancing now. The sidelines were largely empty, save for a dozen-or-so onlookers. Severus walked around the room's edges.

And though he was intent on busying himself over drinks, Severus had half-a-mind to just walk straight out the door.

The second Lucius, Gilderoy, Kouyou, and Cornelius were out of sight, Severus let his shoulders drop. Exhaustion lined his being and a persistent worry creased his brow. He distractedly set the empty champagne glass down.

Politics were never Severus' specialty. He had no desire to play that game. More often than not, Severus was content to let things lie—if not, someone like Albus would point him in a direction deemed proper. But for the one time in his life Severus genuinely wanted to take an action of his own choice—

Someone bumped his shoulder and didn't even mumble an apology.

—he was stuck here *socializing* instead.

Meanwhile Poppy was digging herself into the depths of Yokohama, scouring for leads on how to help their problem child. Severus wanted to busy his hands with that. Not the dry wine he was currently pretending to sip at.

Useless. Again, Severus felt utterly useless.

Perhaps Gilderoy's continued presence here was, in fact, some kind of cosmic penance. If so, Severus should accept it willfully. But if he had to hear Gilderoy inflate his ego one more time, Severus might actually hex the man. So. He dithered by the wines instead.

A flash of movement suddenly caught Severus' attention.

He had already passed it off as an overly-excited dancer when another familiar blur followed after it.

Severus straightened immediately.

Bolting across the ballroom floor, Blaise Zabini was chasing after a tearful Pansy Parkinson.

Severus' eyes widened. His students made a quick sprint of the room, and gathered no small amount of attention before bolting into the exiting corridor. The partygoers were silent for a minute. Only cooing violins filled the air for one stunned moment.

Then, like nothing had happened at all, the dancing and chatting resumed.

Severus stared after where Pansy and Blaise had vanished. His eyes traced their path across the room, and settled on the hall they'd come from.

...just what had happened?

"Children," Barnabas said, suddenly at his side. Severus jerked, not having noticed the man earlier. "Noisy little animals. I don't know how you do it."

Severus' brow pinched. "Teach?"

Barnabas nodded, head knocking heavily with the motion. A closer examination revealed his cheeks to be dusted pink. Beside the editor, a collection of over a dozen empty glasses was steadily building itself.

"Incredible patience," Severus told him, and Barnabas chuckled drunkenly. He glanced again to the far hall. "What's down there?"

Barnabas followed his gaze. "I imagine all the expensive things Lucius doesn't want stolen."

Severus' expression further curdled, not appeased.

Here's the thing:

Severus spent several dreary years not caring about his students at all. He just didn't like them. They *were* noisy, as Barnabas had said. Noisy, annoying, and lazy little brats with no sense to respect what he was imparting on them. He carried this belief into his classroom, and thus spent many an hour berating students over failed potions.

But.

Because there is always a *but.*

Dazai Osamu had a way of worming into your heart. And he was a snarky, lazy brat, of course. But for some reason, looking at Dazai was like looking for the first time. Severus went from biting thoughts like, *you need to put in some effort,* to, *what's stopping you from putting in any effort?*

There was a puzzle to solve. And dammit Severus wanted to solve it!

It was a new, strange sensation—one lined almost entirely with concern. Because this epiphany had come quite late. By the time Severus had started caring enough to think Dazai was being hurt, that hurting had gone on too long.

So. Now he cared about Dazai's wellbeing.

And it was something like flicking a switch, because seeing Pansy crying just now, Severus kind of wanted to care about that, too.

Caring about children. What a disquieting sensation.

Severus abruptly pushed his glass into the editor's hands. Barnabas took it readily, if not somewhat confusedly.

"I'm going to see what happened," Severus said at once.

Barnabas took the wine down in one gulp. "Go get 'em," he slurred. His eyes had drifted back to the dwindling supply of alcohol, and Severus got the sense he wasn't really listening anymore.

Never mind that.

Severus couldn't help Poppy and Dazai right now. But he could certainly help with this.

Course settled, Severus first tried to follow Pansy and Blaise out the front door. But all that earned him was a bewildered-looking coat-check nervously asking if he was leaving early. Looking around revealed nothing, and Severus didn't have any of the necessary materials to cast a tracking spell right now.

So that was a bust, unless Severus wanted to start exploring the surrounding forests blindly. But, though Lucius was friendly towards him, he probably wouldn't appreciate Severus' blatant trespassing.

He bid the servant farewell, earning him a shaky, *"Thank Merlin. I think I lost your coat."*

Severus' usual instinct to bark and bite at her was momentarily tempered by set motivation. So he only snapped, *"find it,"* before returning back into the mansion.

She flinched.

Well then. No children to be found. Perhaps he should locate their parents...

Severus' eyes searched across the ballroom. Eventually, he found Ms. Parkinson standing at Lucius' side. She'd evidently been dragged into conversation with Gilderoy, if the pained look on her face was any indication.

Severus' gaze drifted away. Under no circumstance was he going to talk with Gilderoy again today.

Further searching found Blaise's parents rhythmically dancing at the room's center. They were probably the only two people on the entire guests list that hadn't come to talk politics. Severus was certain they'd only come to dance. The other partygoers were giving them a wide berth—not out of distaste, but rather because they made such sweeping and energetic spins everyone else was afraid they might get swept away in the storm.

Again, no way was Severus stepping into that.

No, he would just wait here until—

Severus blinked.

There he went again. Waiting. Waiting for someone else to take responsibility. To make the hard decisions. To do *something*.

Severus shook himself.

Then, with a steeling breath, made way for the direction Pansy and Blaise had run away from. Perhaps it was just a childish feud—perhaps. Or maybe it was something else. And Severus had enough of choosing to believe what was easiest.

He'd done that with Dazai. He was sick to his stomach with it, now.

Moving again around the edges of the room, Severus escaped further confrontation. Perhaps it was his dour demeanor, but no one so much as glanced his way. No one was any the wiser when he exited the ballroom through an archway clearly marked, *'please, remain in the ballroom.'*

Severus walked right past it.

But, just as the sign indicated, the succeeding hallway was completely empty of guests. There was no indication of what might have hurt his snakes. Severus had to consider, then, that Blaise and Pansy had merely gotten into a fight with one another. That there was no further mystery to solve, and he should very well leave things alone. Realistically, Severus should have turned back then. Returned to his duty of pretending to drink wine and pretending to listen to Gilderoy.

He kept walking instead.

It was quieter, here. And the corridors offered no grating commentary for Severus to roll his eyes at. Steadily, the ballroom music became muddled and muffled.

Severus was just eyeing up an ornate-looking statue of an especially bearded man, when something else caught his attention.

An open door at the end of the hall.

Curious—worrying for his students and knowing Lucius was too busy hosting to catch him snooping—Severus walked to the door. He pushed it open the rest of the way.

Severus' eyes widened.

Draco startled. He shot forward as if to stop Severus from entering. "Professor—!"

But it was too late. Severus had already seen what Draco was steadfastly trying to keep him away from.

The boy standing at his back, face wrapped up crudely with bandages. Wide eyes and a grim set to his mouth.

What...

What in Merlin's name was Dazai Osamu doing at the Malfoy Ball!?

Chapter End Notes

happy birthday + have a nice week :)

*To be clear, Kouyou is aged-up in this fic. I wrote her as an adult here, and she's described as such in the text. Just to clarify lol

next up: snape and dazai

Royal Flush

Chapter Summary

Snape and Dazai have a conversation. Actually - several conversations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What in the world is Snape doing here!?

Snape blinked several times upon entering the room, like he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing.

Honestly, Dazai was kind of doing the same. He'd been half-expecting Blaise and Pansy to show up—he knew they often skipped out on parties together. But Snape? The one professor Dazai knew would be prickly about his presence. Here? *Now?*

Draco was shooting him increasingly frantic looks. Dazai almost wanted to return them, but he pulled himself together quickly. There was no space for mistakes. Not now.

"Severus," Dazai greeted, cheeky. "What brings you here?"

Snape shook himself visibly. He looked entirely rattled to his core, but that single motion seemed to shake most of his sense loose. But for once, he didn't berate Dazai for the overly familiar name. He took a step into the room, but halted before coming any closer. When Snape scanned Dazai's face intensely, something in his expression twisted. "...what is this?"

Dazai rocked back on his feet, wondering how long he could stall Snape without risking the professor seeing Mori.

Witheringly, Dazai realized the answer was *'not long at all.'*

He made his next decision accordingly. "I'm visiting Draco, obviously."

"You should be at home. In Yokohama," Snape said stiffly. He looked between Draco and Dazai again, but his eyes kept slipping anxiously to the bandage over Dazai's eye. Eventually, he stopped fighting the urge, and just kept his eyes on Dazai alone. "What happened." It was not a question.

"I booked a plane, then Draco let me in the window," Dazai replied evasively, then realized he didn't exactly have the luxury of playing around like that right now. A second later, he corrected sheepishly, "Mori doesn't know I'm here."

Hook.

Snape's brows furrowed. He looked pained. "You ran away from home?"

Line.

Dazai nodded, accepting the guess as truth. Snape already looked to believe it before Dazai even agreed. Purposefully, Dazai scratched his cheek—right below where the bandages snugged over his eye.

As expected, Snape's eyes widened. He reached every conclusion he wanted to reach. Dazai welcomed them. *"Shit,"* he hissed. Then, Severus was crossing the room and stooping down to hover nervously over Dazai—like he was afraid Dazai might shatter.

And sinker!

Snape believed the lie fully! He certainly wouldn't be questioning Lucius' allegiances if he thought Dazai had merely run away here to find refuge with a friend. Snape was too predictable like that, really. Always ready to find him hurting. Now all Dazai needed was for Snape to leave.

"If Luc—*uh,* Draco's dad finds out Draco let me in, we'll all be in deep shit."

"Language," Snape chided distractedly. He was still looking Dazai up-and-down for other wounds. There was nothing to find, though. His less significant wounds were either covered or had already healed. He agreed, "you can't stay here."

Dazai pretended to waffle on that idea for several seconds. "No... I'll head back home tonight. Or tomorrow, if I can't catch a plane by then."

Snape took that in with a furrowed brow. He stared in silence for a long moment, an odd expression warring on his face. But all the while Snape was clearly deep in thought, his eyes never once left Dazai. Dazai shifted uncomfortably despite himself. Snape's heavy stares had always left him feeling wrong-footed. And though Snape was often quite easy to distract, Dazai rarely liked doing so. Making the man angry was one thing. But tugging at Snape's concern for him was always uncomfortable. At least this time, the self-inflicted cuts on Dazai's arms were covered.

A few feet to his side, Draco was looking equally out of his depths. When Dazai's eyes flicked to him, Snape shook himself out of his thoughts to follow his gaze.

"Mr. Malfoy," Snape said, clearly having only just remembered Draco was here as well, "your father doesn't know Mr. Dazai is here?"

Dazai and Draco traded a fast, silent look.

Then, Draco was shaking his head. He flattened his shoulders and puffed out his chest—his usual pompous visage at last returning. "He doesn't. And Dazai's right. He can't find out. Father is..." he glanced to Dazai briefly, and only continued once he'd gotten an agreeing nod from the mafioso, "...not Dazai's biggest fan."

“No one is, Draco,” Dazai said. “But I still wouldn’t want to be on his bad side, in particular.”

Snape sighed, deep and heavy. He pinched the bridge of his nose, winced, then dropped his hand to his side instead. At once, he drew in a windy breath and stood straight. Dazai and Draco both watched the professor with curious eyes.

“Very well,” Snape said. His eyes flicked to Draco pointedly. “You. Return to your room—or wherever you’re meant to be right now.”

Draco blinked several times. “Sir,” he protested, “I’m not leaving him alone. Don’t forget, you’re in *my* house—”

“And *I’m* the adult,” Snape hissed back, but Draco didn’t look shaken off in the slightest. “I will allow your insolence only this once, boy, because of the nature of our situation. Do not mistake this temporary leniency as an invitation to disrespect me.”

Draco bristled. He looked torn between arguing or backing off.

Dazai spoke for him. “I’m not even allowed to talk with my friend now, *hm?* Snape is so cruel.”

As expected, Snape’s focus snapped to him, countenance stiff and glare silencing. “I am cleaning up this mess,” Snape said as he gestured vaguely to the office around them. “Mr. Malfoy, go back to your room. Mr. Dazai will be coming with me.”

Dazai and Draco both straightened at that—Dazai like an expectant dog, and Draco judging.

“He can’t *leave,”* Draco stressed. He blinked at his own interjection, then hurriedly amended, “If people see him here—”

“No one will see him,” Snape reassured, but his patience was sounding agitated. “I will take him out the back.”

Again, Draco looked ready to say something. And again, Dazai didn’t let him. They were running on a dwindling and uncertain amount of time. Dazai wanted to take this out before it was too late. Before Mori or Lucius or Kouyou returned and their cover was blown. As long as Snape left soon, he wouldn’t suspect Port Mafia’s scheme.

Dazai scratched a bandage on his wrist. *“Ah...* I think Snape is kidnapping me.”

“Quiet. It is as I told you previously, Mr. Dazai. During your tenure as a student of Hogwarts, you are legally under my care. It’s hardly kidnapping if I take you back to campus.”

Draco glanced at him, curious. Dazai ignored him.

“Classes haven’t resumed yet,” Dazai commented.

Snape grunted. “No. But I can’t allow you to go on like this. Seeing as it is well within my right to do so, I will be taking you somewhere safe for the remaining duration of winter break.”

Dazai pretended to think it over for a few seconds. In reality, however, he was quite eager to get moving. When Draco looked at him in askance, Dazai declared, “If you say so.”

“I do,” Snape confirmed. He turned back to Draco. “Room. Now.”

Draco shot Dazai one final glance before saying, “After I clean up Dazai’s mess.” He inclined his head to the shattered paperweight.

“Very well.” Snape eyed the debris, assessing, before shaking himself. “Problem Child, come.”

Snape waited just a second for Dazai to follow before turning back out the door. He checked the hall twice both ways before nodding. Then, swiftly, he took the right-side corridor away from the busy ballroom. It was long, empty, and presumably took them to one of the mansion’s back exits. Just before closing the door at their backs, Dazai spun around to give Draco a double-thumbs up. Draco’s frown was the only response he received.

“Hurry, boy.”

Dazai skipped to keep up with Snape’s long stride. “I’m hurrying, Sir.”

Snape watched him over his back. He sighed. “You can’t even stay out of trouble while on vacation.”

They turned one corner, then another. Dazai didn’t recognize their surroundings, but there wasn’t an overdosing amount of magic in the air. He didn’t think these stairs and doors were enchanted like the ones at Hogwarts. Still, the unfamiliarity of the Malfoy mansion had him treading closely on Snape’s heels. The threat of becoming lost still hung over him.

“I told you, it's the trouble that finds me. I’m perfectly innocent.”

Snape grunted. And when Dazai looked at him closely, he thought the potions’ master looked especially tired. Cautiously, Snape led him past a series of clearly unused bedrooms, an ugly-but-expensive collection of art, and a pearlescent bathroom. All the while Snape stared dead-ahead at his destination.

Dazai trailed behind him no less fast, looking around as they walked for any sign of partygoers. Or worse: Mori. But the Malfoy estate was empty except for the busy ballroom and kitchen, which Snape had quickly ushered him past.

After a long and tense walk through the mansion, they finally arrived at their goal: a clear glass door that led to a back garden.

Snape waited until Dazai was standing outside beside an angry-looking fern before finally relaxing his shoulders. He cleared his throat. “We’ll take the Knight Bus. Keep up.”

Dazai quirked a brow, but still followed obediently when Snape gestured him.

They walked all the way around the mansion to the front—some ways away from the actual building and nearer instead to a paved and winding road. It was quiet here. The sky was

darkening, but the ball was still far from over. The road was empty when Snape lifted his wand to hail the Knight Bus.

Because Dazai had ridden the Knight Bus last year, he wasn't surprised when a triple-decker bus bounded down the path wildly several seconds later. Snape returned his wand to his cloak. The doors propped themselves open and Snape indicated for Dazai to enter first. He did, but immediately upon boarding a surge of magic suddenly surrounded him.

Dazai shivered. It was like walking into a spider web, or a thin linen curtain. The magic caught on his skin and traipsed with him all the way to their seat. Unsure what exactly what magically fueling the bus, Dazai wisely kept his bare skin to himself. Just in case.

He wore a disgruntled expression.

"What," Snape intoned, sitting beside him. Dazai had chosen a seat near to the bus' middle—not wanting to risk being seen by boarders near the front, but also not willing to walk all the way to the back with this filmy sensation on him.

Rather than answer, Dazai gestured generally to the bus surrounding them.

Snape squinted at him for several seconds before his eyes suddenly widened. His head snapped up to look at the seats, the windows, the stairs with new understanding. He whirled back on Dazai. "You didn't have a problem last time."

Dazai merely shrugged.

Last year, he'd gotten a headache on the Knight Bus. But in all honesty, Dazai hadn't known what he'd been feeling back then. The idea of Magical Sensitivity was unknown to him. The nuances of spells and charms and hexes a mystery. Now, armed with knowledge and experience, Dazai was no differently bogged down by the magical sensations of the Knight Bus. He only had the sense to articulate it, now.

He felt it in the air and on his skin: an animation charm, among several other complex, intertwined enchantments. Perhaps a speed spell—

Without warning, the bus suddenly kicked to life. Inertia braced Dazai hard into the back of his seat. Beside him, Snape barely seemed to have noticed the change, except for a slight stiffening of his shoulders. Within a second, the world had become a colorful blur outside the window.

Definitely a speed-enhancing spell, Dazai grouched internally. Though he'd never seen such a spell cast in person before, he was certain that it must be the *zippy-zappy* magic signature he was sensing.

"Do you need off the bus?"

Dazai shook his head. "It just feels strange. I'm not going to throw up on you," he teased.

Snape sniffed, unamused. "Tell me if that changes."

“Sure,” Dazai replied, still teasing. Snape shot him a glare.

The Knight Bus was fast enough that it didn’t take long to reach their destination—it zoomed through cities and forests and country-sides faster than Dazai could really make sense of the colorful blurs outside. In total, their trip lasted only about five minutes.

During which they’d picked up two other passengers and delivered one of them to a busy-looking Italian restaurant. Without needing to be told, Dazai had attempted to duck himself into Snape’s side whenever another passenger walked past. Unfortunately, it was difficult to make oneself invisible in a bus seat. Upon seeing the Demon Student sitting stiffly beside Severus Snape, their eyes had widened and they’d hastened to find a seat far, far away.

Whatever would come of that, Dazai could only guess. But at the very least, they couldn’t connect him to Lucius. He was counting that as a victory.

When the Knight Bus finally rolled to its last stop, Dazai stared out the window confusedly.

“Up,” Snape told him, already getting to his feet. “This is our stop.”

Dazai glanced at Snape, then back out the window. “This isn’t Hogwarts,” he said haltingly.

Outside, none of the recognizable peaks and spires of Hogwarts pierced into the sky. Nor did he see any of the familiar posts surrounding Platform nine-and-three-quarters. And although there *was* a rather oppressive-looking woodland around them, it wasn't the Forbidden Forest. Something gloomy seemed to hang over the entire area. When Dazai spotted a meager cottage at the edge of the treeline, this feeling of gloom only increased. Though perhaps it was only the waning daylight that gave the whole area a sense of abandonment.

“Correct,” Snape said in response. When Dazai still didn’t budge for several long seconds, he sighed. “This is my home. The train to Hogwarts doesn’t run this late, so we will be staying here for the evening. Now get up before the Knight Bus takes you with it.”

As if in answer, the bus rumbled disagreeably under their feet.

Dazai made a face. He quickly stood.

This time, it was Snape who led them out of the bus. The second Dazai’s shoes crinkled onto frost-covered grass, the Knight Bus’ doors automatically shut. It shot into the woods and vanished a breath later. The entire forest seemed to shake from the force of its departure.

Dazai stared after it just long enough to see when the pine trees stopped shivering. He turned back to the cottage and Snape.

“You live in the middle of nowhere,” Dazai broke the silence that had formed between them.

Snape sighed, aggrieved. “Hurry up and get inside. It’s cold out here.”

“You could live somewhere warmer,” Dazai hummed as he skipped after Snape’s retreating back. Pine needles cracked underfoot. He had to admit—it was cold. His slung-over coat did

little to break the wind. So when Snape magically unlocked the cottage door with a wave of his hand, Dazai didn't hesitate to clamber in behind him.

It was instantly warmer inside, and the buzz of magic around them told Dazai there was probably some kind of heating charm. It felt familiar—the same one used in Lucius' mansion, then. Dazai wondered silently, and bitterly, why the same spells couldn't be used in the Hogwarts dungeons. It was always freezing down there!

Snape locked the door again. Now that they were inside, Dazai took a moment to look around Snape's home.

On the near wall there was a bookcase filled mostly with potion textbooks. Dazai noticed a few fairytales strewn in among them. There were also quite a few trinkets scattered across the shelves—a hand-carved wooden snake, an old wand holster, and a collection of truly atrocious coffee mugs among them. Beside it was a plush, black sofa. A green quilt was thrown over one shoulder. In front of that, a stained coffee table—again, smothered with a truly incredible number of ugly mugs. A couple potion books on the table looked to be particularly advanced. The fireplace wasn't lit.

It was surprisingly... homey. Somehow, juxtaposing the scene with Professor Snape felt wrong.

"You drink a lot of coffee."

Dazai eyed a mug on the table. It read, *'life begins after coffee.'*

Snape's brow twitched. "Those were gifts."

"Still. If you drink too much coffee, your heart will beat out of your chest and you'll die."

"Stop talking."

Dazai mimed zipping his mouth shut.

Snape waited a second for the quiet to settle, then said, "Sit down on the couch." He pointed. "I want to take a look at your eye."

"That's not necessary," Dazai told him, staying firmly by the door. "It's all patched up. You'd probably only make it worse."

"We'll do this standing, if you don't sit down," Snape ignored him. Then, without waiting for an answer, left for the side hallway. Dazai didn't know what was down there, but he did spy a kitchen through the other door. Maybe a bedroom?

Dazai watched him go, frowning. There wasn't any harm in Snape seeing the wound—Dazai just felt squirmy even thinking about it. Except, of course...

"You can't use a healing spell on me," Dazai said the second Snape returned from wherever he'd gone. "I'll get sick."

Snape's head snapped to him, but his expression betrayed no surprise over this fact. So clearly he hadn't suddenly forgotten. What was the bother, then?

Snape eyes flicked to the sofa then Dazai.

Dazai huffed "You just want to look?" He ambled to the couch, drawing out each step purposefully slow. "Snape is so creepy."

He sat, and the couch pillow sunk underneath him. A cloud of dust plumed at the action, thick and grey. Dazai coughed and tried failingly to flap away the pollution.

There was a tingle of magic on his skin, and suddenly the dust had cleared.

Dazai's head whipped up to his professor.

Snape held his wand aloft, pointed at the extinct dust cloud. When Dazai turned to him, he returned it somewhere within his robe. Evidently satisfied with that, he followed Dazai to the couch and dropped to his knees in front of it. He set a small, plastic container on the coffee table beside him. Whereupon the box pushed aside a layer of dust on the table Dazai hadn't noticed before.

He crinkled his nose. "This place is a mess. Don't you ever clean?"

In response, Snape indicated for Dazai to remove his bandages.

With a huffy sigh, Dazai obliged. It unraveled around his head in several layers of wrapping and gauze. If it got infected from this, Dazai would be sure to tell Mori it was all Snape's fault.

"I haven't been living here since classes began," Snape answered testily. "And if you keep questioning me, you'll wind up with detention for the rest of the semester."

"That's not threatening at all," Dazai said, and Snape knew it.

There was a sizable pile of cotton waste now gathering on the floor. It made an ugly mess, but Snape didn't seem bothered. Instead, he was all-eyes on Dazai's slowly revealing face. It had Dazai's hands moving slower. He automatically drew out the reveal without any real thought on the matter. Meanwhile, Snape's waiting gaze never waving.

And when did Dazai finally reach the bottom layer, a wet piece of gauze slapped onto floor.

Red.

Snape sucked in a sharp breath, immediately leaning in to view the wound. Dazai couldn't see it himself, but he still got the gist. It was probably just as ugly as it had been the day Father died. A weeping wound. Swollen and red. Neatly done stitches, courtesy of Mori. A dark, empty socket—though he kept it closed now.

"Whoever did this to you, I'm going to..." Snape swallowed down the beginnings of a growling anger.

Dazai half-lidded his remaining eye when the open air unexpectedly burned.

Snape inspected the wound for over a minute. During which, Dazai sat stiff-as-stone. He had to guess at Snape's thoughts—he couldn't read body language or facial expression when they were this close. His unseeing left eye helped naught, either.

After a second full minute had past, Snape finally pulled away enough that Dazai could make out his face.

Pale white, lips thin, brows pinched.

By the time Dazai finished looking Snape over, the professor had snapped open the lid on his mysterious box. Dazai craned to make out what was inside.

"A first aid kit?" Dazai asked, surprise obvious and genuine in his voice. He started to squint at the contents, but a lance of pain shot through his wound. He relaxed his expression instead, pondering, "What use does a wizard have for that? You lot have a spell for everything."

Snape withdrew a cloth from his supplies, then turned back to Dazai. He winced upon seeing the wound again. "I'm going to clean the blood," he waited for Dazai's nod to begin. Snape began to carefully dab around the socket, dragging the cloth through a claggy substance in the crease of his eye.

"The limits of magical healing are complex," Snape informed while he worked. He sounded calm in a way that was audibly practiced and sitting just over a growling anger. "More significant wounds still require bandaging."

Dazai scrunched his eyes shut when Snape lightly patted over the goriest part. "Be careful," he chastised. The cloth lifted away upon protest. "You're going to make it worse."

Snape sighed tiredly. "If I don't clean this, it will get infected. That will hurt more, I assure you."

"Yeah, but at least your hands wouldn't be all over my face. You're going to poke my other eye out by mistake."

Again, Snape pulled back. His hand and the cloth dropped unceremoniously into his lap. A strange and difficult to read expression was on his face when he tossed the now-red cloth into the waste pile. Then he pulled a roll of bandages out of his kit. Alongside it was a package of fresh gauze and medical tape. Of course, Snape didn't have the ointment Dazai was supposed to apply, but Mori wasn't here to yell at them for it, so that was fine.

"I can do that," Dazai offered. He bent forward to take them, but Snape snatched them out of reach before he could.

"Sit still," Snape told him. "I will do it."

Dazai threw his arms up, exasperated. "You've been hanging out with Madam Pomfrey too much."

Unexpectedly, Snape snorted at that. Dazai blinked, then a cheeky grin lit his face as well.

But Snape's good humor was smothered a second later by, once again, a furrowed brow and pursed lips. Like he'd just eaten something sour. Something pensive darkened his eyes. Dazai's stilled automatically in response to the change, and thus managed to restrain a flinch when Snape began to tape the gauze in place.

"Will you tell me how this happened?"

This time, Dazai did jump. Snape *tsked* and narrowly avoided poking open the line of stitches just under his socket.

"Relax." Snape paused for a long moment before resuming his task. "However it may seem, those of us teaching at Hogwarts do want to help you. If you are being hurt at home, we have the resources to have you homed somewhere safer."

Dazai considered his response for a moment. Snape seemed inclined to give the break to him —doing nothing but to continue wrapping Dazai's face. Only Dazai really didn't have anything more to say on this subject. Snape had made up his mind, and was entirely unshakable about it. It was annoying. And a dead-end on all fronts.

Besides, Snape was the type of person to just let things lie.

Still. Dazai ought to at least attempt a cover-up story.

"I was mugged," Dazai told him after a moment. The lie sat embarrassingly on his tongue. Executives didn't get mugged. Still, he wasn't about to say that. Nor did he have any particular desire to draw attention onto Father—what with the man recently murdered and all.

Snape's head snapped away from his work. His brows pinched and his eyes were calculating. He clicked his tongue. "You were attacked on the street?"

"Don't ask it like that," Dazai pouted. "Snape doesn't believe me... how cruel."

Snape ground his teeth, looking like he wanted either to bark something unsavory or eat his own words. Dazai wasn't sure which it was. Regardless, he then asked, "And this... *attack.* That's why you ran away?"

"I wouldn't call it running away, necessarily. Just... leaving without permission."

"You understand, boy," Snape continued, unperturbed, "that this is hardly the first time I've been concerned for your homelife. Whether this attack was random or not, you are clearly not safe in Yokohama."

"If Snape says so."

"I do," Snape stressed, to which Dazai stuck out his tongue childishly. "I will ask outright, then. Because anything less appears to be of little use with you. Dazai: are you being abused at home? I can help you."

Dazai couldn’t help the stiffening of his spine, nor the frowning of his falsely cheerful face.

He was always made uncomfortable—wrong-footed—by questions like that, and wasn’t sure why. Perhaps it was a weakness. Something wrong in his blood. The thing that made him cold, always. The thing that made him still whenever Father spoke; or Mori’s hand feathered over his injuries. It didn't really bear thinking about.

He swallowed around a stone.

When Snape finished wrapping the bandages, he leaned back to inspect his work before nodding. He asked, “Do you have any other wounds?”

Dazai lifted a hand to his eye to feel. It had been cleaned and wrapped well—not quite to the level of Mori’s work, but effective nonetheless.

“I don’t,” he said, not entirely honest. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Snape grunted, a critical eye still on Dazai. “When we return to Hogwarts, Poppy will take another look at that. Understood?”

“Understood,” Dazai confirmed with a lazy mock-salute. His eyes flicked to the pile of old bandages. The bloodied cloth stood out to him grotesquely. He cleared his throat. “As for your concern,” Dazai said, cherry-picking each word, “I wouldn’t worry over that kind of thing. I can take care of myself.”

Snape drew in a breath, and Dazai made himself meet the professor’s eyes.

“Anyway,” Dazai continued, drawling, “you’re greatly misinterpreting my situation. You’re going to get yourself in trouble if you keep at this. But there’s no convincing someone stubborn like Snape, is there?”

Snape’s expression steeled. His confidence was strangely unwavering. “I’m not giving up on you.”

Dazai smiled knowingly. Snape was playing a hopeless game, and so was he. “You should.”

“I can help—”

“Don’t.”

They stared at each other for a long moment, unblinking and knowing the other would never budge. It seemed their waltz may have ground to a standstill, Dazai thought.

Apparently, Snape must have realized the same as well. He sighed again, just as heavy and tired. He ran a hand over his face, haggard. “Fine. Tell me about the petrifications, then.”

Dazai blinked at the non-sequitur.

The petrifications were done and over with, though he supposed Snape wouldn’t know that. In his coat pocket, Riddle’s diary suddenly felt heavy. He merely lifted a questioning brow.

“You know as much as I do.”

Snape leveled him with a wry stare.

“Really. I’ve been staying out of that mess.”

“The truth please, boy,” Snape intoned. “If we don’t talk about your home situation, we talk about this. It is your choice."

Dazai scowled. Despite Snape physically sitting beneath him, Dazai felt in no way were they on equal ground. Snape was definitely calling the shots. And rightly so, he supposed. They were in Snape’s house, anyhow. Still, Dazai didn’t like being worked over.

“What do you want to know about the petrifications?” Dazai asked, deciding his course.

Snape nodded. He didn’t look particularly pleased with that decision and, with a darkened expression seemed to say, *we aren't done talking about this,* that Dazai disliked immensely. “Tell me who your suspect is.”

Dazai’s narrowing eyes were automatic. Suspicious. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t.” Snape folded his arms. “I already know you’ve been investigating, Problem Child. Just tell me what you know and I won’t have you expelled for disobeying my direct orders to not get involved.”

...he knew?

How?

Dazai even had Hells’ Hounds fooled into thinking he wasn’t investigating the petrifications! And he knew that neither Draco nor Blaise would blab the secret. Which meant...

Dazai mentally examined his list of leads. He’d spoken with Theodore Nott, but not explicitly about the petrifications. Luna—but again, he’d said nothing specific. Pansy wouldn’t say anything if she knew it would land Draco in trouble...

He suddenly blinked in realization.

The witness!

The mysterious person—or persons?—who witnessed the petrification of Collin Creevey! They must have overheard Dazai talking about it, or seen something they shouldn’t have. This witness was the only real unknown that day. They must have said something to Snape... but what else might they have heard or seen? Dazai kept his face blank, but internally he was waging war against his memories.

Had he seen anyone following him? Had anyone acted strange around him?

A curious thought tickled at the corner of his brain.

Dazai shook it off. He would deal with that after returning to campus. But first—

The best course of action to avoid suspicion on all fronts is...

“Snape is ruining all my fun,” Dazai whined. “But I guess the game is already over, anyway, so it’s fine.”

Snape straightened abruptly. “What did you do?”

Dazai tittered. “I just mean that I’ve solved the mystery, so there’s no more fun to be had. You’re always seeing the worst in me. It’s disheartening—a teacher shouldn’t be like that.”

“I am not playing games with you. Tell me what you know. Who is responsible?”

Dazai paused for half-a-second—just long enough to organize the lie in his head. Simple was best, Dazai had always thought. Tell only what you had to, and stick to the truth where possible. People’s minds were their greatest enemies. If you gave them only the bare minimum information, they would reach their own conclusions. Whatever they were looking for, they would find.

Dazai knew what Snape wanted. This lie was easy.

He spread his fingers out alluringly. Then, with the utmost confidence, declared, “No one.”

Snape blinked. Then, annoyance prickled his mien. “The truth, or—”

“It is the truth,” Dazai protested. “No one is responsible for the petrifications.”

“...” Snape’s anger dropped. A blank seriousness replaced it. “Explain.”

Dazai nodded, pleased. “There’s a basilisk living in the walls of the school.”

Snape’s mouth snapped audibly shut. He stared at Dazai with a bewildered sort of countenance. Then, like the words were being ground out of him, asked, “How do you know that?”

Dazai answered—his kernel of truth. “I can feel it,” he made a vague motion with his hand to indicate Magical Sensitivity. “Moving through the walls. And especially when its petrifying someone. After that, it was just a matter of finding the right book in the library.”

“I see...” Snape trailed off. His face was twisted in consternation and disbelief. “A basilisk is loose in the school... wait.”

“Hm?”

Snape shook his head, turning a glare onto Dazai at once. “You’re still hiding something, brat. There was a note left behind at the first scene. A basilisk alone couldn’t have left that.” He reasoned, “so there is a human culprit. You’re covering for them. Why?”

“Hardly,” Dazai scoffed. “Everyone there hates me. I wouldn’t hesitate to cast blame on someone like Pansy if I could. Unfortunately, I’m not feeling up to a frame job at the moment.”

Snape’s brow twitched.

Dazai hastened to continue, “The message is unrelated.”

“How so?” Snape asked severely.

Hook, line, and sinker once again. Snape is too easy!

At least, Snape was easy when he wasn’t trying to coddle Dazai over some imagined abuse case.

“Lockhart,” Dazai answered simply, the lie coming quickly to him. This was the second time now he’d used Lockhart as an excuse. But the man was so unreliable, it worked like a charm. Moreover, Dazai could recall seeing Lockhart in the vicinity of the first petrification—locking himself alone in a room. No alibi to confirm him. When Snape’s eyes bugged in shock, then thinned with dark contemplation, Dazai explained, “I only narrowly missed him at the scene. But when he saw Mrs. Norris, Lockhart took it as an opportunity for one of his stories.”

Snape glowered. He was clearly considering this turn of events. After a moment, he grimly shook his head. “You’ve confronted him about this.”

Dazai disagreed. “You know how he is—making up conflicts to be the hero of. Is it really so surprising he would pretend this *Chamber of Whatever* was open? Just so he could solve it?” Dazai flapped a hand. “Anyway, he immediately blamed me for it, even when evidence said otherwise. Lockhart’s just looking for another chapter in that book of his.”

“I see...” Snape said. And while Dazai could hear some hesitation in his tone, he could also tell Snape believed him. Or at least, was willing to try believing him.

Which was great. Because Dazai was in no way going to name the actual culprit. Partly because it was his friends’ sister, and partly because the truth pointed directly back to Port Mafia and Lucius.

“He’s drumming up trouble so he can have me expelled,” Dazai emphasized. “He’s an opportunist. The message is unrelated.” Then, to further drive his point home, he added, “Really, he’s always trying to plan these things out. Earlier this year, he wrote me a script to follow, you know. I still have it if you want to read it. Though I imagine if you wait a year, Lockhart will just put the villainous overture he wrote me in that book of his he's always prattling on about.”

Snape took that in silently for a long moment. After that, he sighed, sounding haggard. He pinched the bridge of his nose bruisingly. “Dammit, Gilderoy,” he hissed under his breath.

And Dazai knew he’d convinced him.

Thinking this, Dazai playfully harrumphed. “What a waste. I solve the mystery and can’t even do anything about it. What am I going to do about a giant snake, *hm?* Maybe I’ll just let myself get petrified. See what Lockhart does then.”

“Do not even consider that,” Snape snapped. Dazai raised his hands placatingly. “And stop investigating problems that don’t concern you. That’s my job.”

“As if. You were going the complete wrong direction, I bet.”

Snape bristled, and Dazai grinned impishly.

“And this basilisk... you know where it is?”

“I’d have to be at school for that,” Dazai told him. “And it would have to be kind of nearby. I don’t know where it is most of the time.”

Snape hummed. He scratched his chin in thought. Then, with a grunt, he pushed to his feet. Dazai twitched at the sudden movement.

“Thank you for telling me now,” Snape said. “Though in the future, tell me earlier when you solve one of your ‘mysteries.’ Albus may have been able to put a stop to the petrifications much earlier had he known.”

“Sorry for overestimating you, Sir.”

Snape’s lip twitched. “Expect a detention when we return to school. I told you explicitly not to look into this.”

Dazai blew a raspberry that Snape raised a brow at.

Snape sighed. He patted his robes down free of dust. Apparently, he was done with the interrogation. Dazai silently preened at his success.

“I’ll make us dinner,” Snape said at last, exhaustion and muted anger evident in his voice. “You get comfortable. And do not snoop around my things, Problem Child.”

Dazai lifted his hands as if to say, *‘who, me?’*

Looking terribly suspicious, Snape retreated to the kitchen.

Once he was alone, Dazai shimmied further into the corner of the couch. He threw the blanket over his lap snugly. It was warm in Snape’s home, and Dazai didn’t mind the blanket’s pressure, even with Mori’s coat still hanging over his shoulders. He sat stiffly underneath. Only every so often did his fingers twitch to untie a loose thread. He could hear Snape fussing about in the kitchen—the opening and closing of cupboards and the grunt of a man looking for food in a house that hadn’t been occupied in months. Dazai listened to it all, grim.

Dazai sighed. Perhaps there was a cleaner path out of Snape’s insistent questioning, and he was just too attached to Hells’ Hounds to see it. Too unwilling to make hard decision that

would lose him his gang. Mori would be chastising him, right now. Snape was busy scrounging for food.

Abuse... there's no way something like that could ever apply to me. Snape just doesn't understand how it is.

At least he'd temporarily dropped the conversation. Dazai could only put up with so much for so long.

Disliking the thought, Dazai looked around for a distraction. The coffee mugs were, he supposed, interesting. But he could hardly break them apart then glue them back together again. It would be an entertaining puzzle, but Dazai didn't know if Snape had glue. Also, he would certainly wind up with another detention. Even if breaking some of these would certainly be doing the man a favor.

Or he could break them. Use the shards to slice open a vein. *To get blood on Snape's floor, though...*

'I can't adult today,' a mug told him. Dazai pretended not to have seen it.

His eyes landed on the potion textbooks instead.

It was long. Definitely high level—well beyond the level he could find in the Hogwarts library. And, honestly, Dazai had never really given potion making much thought. Surely he would have something to learn. That would keep his mind occupied while Snape tried to find food.

Thinking this, Dazai grabbed one of the books off the table. He pushed back into the sofa, got comfortable, and began reading.

By the time Snape had pulled together honeyed-tea (in two of the most awful mugs Dazai had ever laid eyes upon) and two bowls of canned soup, Dazai was already a quarter-way through the first book. He didn't want to set it down when Snape came back. But the bowl was set in front of him on the table, and Snape stared at him pointedly until he moved.

The mug Snape set in front of him had a drawing of a hungry cobra snake on it and read, *'Got Rats?'*

Dazai closed the book and set it beside him. He remembered his page to pick back up later.

Who knew potions were actually interesting? Once you got past all the watered-down crap they put in school textbooks, that was. But this higher level text actually seemed to hold some meaning. He told Snape as much.

"Eat," the professor droned.

Dazai sniffed.

"Snape is trying to poison me? I hope it's not the painful kind."

Snape made a face like he was about to object, but stuttered to a stop when, despite his protests, Dazai at once started to eat.

The soup was still steaming when he pulled it into his lap—careful not to spill on the sofa. He blew on it with a whistle. A cloud of steam wafted across the table, where Snape was gruntingly lowering himself to the floor again.

Dazai waited for his soup to cool. He raised a brow. “Don’t you have anywhere to sit?”

Snape shot him a look. Then he shoved a scalding spoonful of chicken soup into his mouth before it cooled. His face twisted painfully a second later, and he had to take several wheezing breaths to keep from burning his tongue.

Dazai laughed.

“Don’t—” he coughed, and Dazai laughed harder. “Don’t ask questions.”

Dazai rolled his eye at the familiar command. He made a show of blowing on his soup again. The smell of chicken broth and corn wafted lazily around them. “Fine, then. The floor must be really comfortable, Snape, Sir, for you to always be sitting on it.”

Snape clicked his tongue, then winced when the burned appendage must have stung. “Brat,” he spat. When Dazai only responded by snorting again, he ground out, “I do not often have guests. One couch is satisfactory for me.”

Dazai hummed. He looked around the room again. And despite the dozens of coffee mugs and books, Snape’s answer seemed to ring true.

One sofa. One hanger on the coat-rack. One blanket.

Snape definitely lived alone. And he didn’t seem to ever want guests, either. Dazai couldn’t relate. Yokohama was a bustling city, and Port Mafia’s headquarters was its epicenter. There wasn’t a quiet day there, nor an empty room.

“You don’t have a dining table,” Dazai commented.

“I do,” Snape indicated towards the kitchen with his chin.

“And you still sit on the floor? Snape is so weird.”

“I’m keeping an eye on *you,* Problem Child,” Snape said, eyes daggers. “And I was right to. I’m gone for ten minutes and you’ve already raided my shelf.”

“Actually, this one was on the table.” Dazai stirred his soup in a slow, circular motion. A meaty chunk of chicken sunk to the bottom. He tried to pierce it with the spoon, but misjudged the distance and clanked the bottom of the bowl instead. “Anyway, shouldn’t you be appreciative that I’m reading? That’s practically schoolwork.”

“It’s not,” Snape argued. He braved another spoonful of soup. This time, he chewed and swallowed without making a funny face, and Dazai sighed. Snape shot him a knowing glare.

Dazai wasn't really hungry. But he was sure the potion master would make a fuss if he didn't eat anything—Snape and Pomfrey were close, after all. Dazai stirred his soup like it was a potion in-the-making for several long seconds before finally bracing himself to eat some. He spooned out some broth and drank it.

Salt and warmth bloomed across his tastebuds.

Deeming it not terribly stomach-curdling, he scooped out a bit more.

He'd drank a few tablespoons worth of broth when the silence suddenly dawned on him. Dazai curiously looked up from his soup.

From the other side of the table, Snape was watching him strangely.

"What?" Dazai asked.

Snape's blank expression frowned. "Nothing," he said. "Eat as much as you can. Healing wounds need energy."

"Obviously," Dazai pointed his spoon mockingly at Snape. A splash of warmed broth splattered across the table. "But it's hardly my fault if you only have years-old soup in here. This is no good. I'll probably get sick." As an afterthought, he added a longing, "or maybe I'll die."

Snape's lip curled around his spoon. He dropped it in his bowl, clinking, and said, "It's hardly that old. And if you're going to be sick, do it in the bathroom."

"Yes, Sir. I'll plan out my vomiting accordingly," Dazai drawled, twirling his spoon around.

Snape paused before taking another bite—expression drawing up with disgust at Dazai's less-than appetizing response. "Just eat. Brat."

Dazai stuck his tongue out, but did in fact eat another spoonful. He bit into a kernel of corn and it popped under his sharpest tooth.

Another long moment passed in near silence. The clinking of metal spoons in plastic bowls was the only conversation between them.

At once, Dazai was suddenly aware that he and Snape had hardly spent this much time together. Not without explicit reason. Usually between them, once Snape was done interrogating him, Dazai would always be free to go. But not today. Today, the interrogation was over but they were both still here. And while their magic lessons were also quite long, they followed a similar trend. It was all business and then Dazai got to leave. He liked the *getting to leave* part.

Now, an awkward air had settled between them.

In all honesty, Dazai didn't mind the silence. Snape was less annoying when he wasn't talking, after all. But that didn't lessen the feeling that, probably, there was something he was supposed to be doing. Something to say, or an action to take. Dazai took another look around

the room, and thought it was probably because this was Snape's house. They didn't have the relatively equal-ground of Hogwarts.

Even though Snape had invited him, Dazai felt a little like he was intruding.

It had his skin prickling.

"Finish your soup," Snape said suddenly, interrupting Dazai's wandering thoughts. He was watching the executive with a watching gaze.

Dazai glanced down at his bowl. It was about half-empty, though he'd really only drank the broth and nibbled a few pieces of chicken. But now, a heavy weight had settled in his stomach. Dazai said, "I'll really throw up if I keep going. Don't tell me Snape actually wanted that—"

Snape's lip curled, offended. "Don't make a mess on my floor."

Smirking, Dazai relented his bowl to the table. Snape eyed the bowl with a critical stare.

"You didn't eat much," Snape said slowly.

Dazai grabbed his tea from the table instead of responding. It still had a small curl of steam coming over it, but wasn't hot to the touch. He took a tentative sip.

"Mr. Dazai—"

"I'm not so hungry," Dazai huffed, burying his nose in the tea. Sweetness lingered on his tongue. He took another sip. "Don't make that face. You're starting to look like Blaise when I skip breakfast."

Snape's face pinched. "You skip—?"

"Ughhhh, now you sound like him too."

"Stop interrupting me!" he snapped suddenly.

Dazai's mouth clamped shut, and he barely restrained the instinctive flinch that fought to rack through him. "My bad," he said, voice carefully not tight.

Snape blinked. Briefly, something apologetic flickered across his face. It was gone as soon as it arrived, however, and Dazai could only guess at its meaning. When he next spoke, Snape's voice was very level. "You shouldn't skip meals. You're thin enough as is."

Dazai hummed into his tea. His fingers itched to pick at something, but the mug kept them occupied. He settled for tapping out a familiar beat instead—something he'd heard distantly playing at the Malfoy Winter Ball. The ceramic clicked under his nails.

Snape met his wandering stare. "Sorry," he said, "for raising my voice."

Dazai was quick to speak over him. "You said *'eat as much as I can,'"* he recited petulantly.

Snape paused, watching him, then sighed. After a second, he put his own bowl down beside Dazai's. It was nearly empty, save for where Snape had pushed about a dozen carrot pieces into the side, uneaten. He also grabbed his tea. This time, he made sure to blow on it several times before drinking from his *'World's Okayest Professor'* mug. When it didn't burn him, he drew out a tired breath. "I suppose I did."

Satisfied, Dazai sipped on his tea. It went down easier than the soup had.

Hoping for a distraction from Snape's stare (which had taken on a worryingly considering appearance once again), Dazai asked, "So, what do you do around here for fun?"

Snape blinked.

"I mean," he continued, looking around the room again pointedly. Aside from the books and the mess that needed cleaning, there wasn't much to do here. He was personally familiar with spending hours and hours alone in a room with nothing to do. Just barking dogs for company, and nothing to do with his hands except to twist and pull at his fingers. But Snape was hardly in the same situation. Surely, the potion master must do something entertaining with his free time. And now, stuck in this strange cottage alone with the man, Dazai itched for a distraction. He skimmed over the books—which were apparently off-limits—and the coffee mugs. There really wasn't anything to do—

Oh!

Dazai stood up so suddenly that Snape startled and his tea splashed dangerously close to spilling.

"What are you doing? Sit down," Snape told him snappishly.

"You've got cards!" Dazai cheered, not at all sitting back down. He reached for them where they were hidden by a checkered mug. He missed them by a few inches—depth perception shot to all hell. But he covered the flub up by pretending to swipe away some dust. Then he whirled back on Snape. "Let's play!"

Snape blinked at him, looking bewildered with Dazai's sudden chipperness. He shook his head and sighed. "Don't just go snooping around my things, brat. And you can play cards after you eat more soup."

"I'll be sick!" Dazai protested again as he returned to the sofa. He proceeded to ignore Snape's request and unpacked the cards anyway. He set his mug down on the table in such a way that the cartoon snake was facing away from him. "C'mon. Play a round with me."

"At least eat a few more spoonfuls," Snape argued.

Dazai made a face. His eyes flicked between the cards and the soup in contemplation. Then, the solution dawned on him. "If you win, I'll have some more."

Upon realizing what Dazai meant, his expression hardened into a scowl. "I'm not gambling your eating habits."

Dazai ignored him and shuffled the deck. He rifled the deck with bent thumbs, cascaded the cards, then did it thrice more. Even with half his vision gone, these tricks were easy. All muscle memory. The rhythmic *shuf-shuf-shuf* of cards had Snape's house sounding like a casino hall.

Snape watched Dazai's practiced hands, but looked to his face when Dazai said, "Sure you will. I want to play five-card draw."

While Snape wasn't looking, Dazai folded the cards together one more time. His hands searchingly cascaded the deck.

Snape clicked his tongue. "Do you *want* detention?" He asked sardonically.

Dazai shrugged and dealt the cards. Five to him, and five to Snape. They didn't have a third person to deal, so he simply set the stack between them instead. He bent the cards up to see what his hand was—nothing worth betting on—then looked to Snape to do the same.

For a moment, all Snape did was stare at him.

"You're supposed to look at your cards now."

His brow twitched. "I know how to play."

Dazai nodded, expectant, and Snape huffed.

Finally, and with more agitation than strictly necessary, Snape snatched his cards off the table. When he saw them, his sneer deepened.

Dazai snorted. A bad hand, then. They both had rotten luck.

"There you go," Dazai said, clapping. Snape's eyes shot to him glaringly. "If you win, I'll get a detention. If I win—"

"We aren't betting anything."

"But that's where the fun is! Where is Snape's enjoyment going to come from if he isn't threatening to make students clean cauldrons for an hour, *hm?"*

"Don't be a brat. I hardly need your permission to assign detentions."

Dazai nodded and fingered his cards. "Fine, fine. I'll have some soup if you win. Snape is such a stickler..."

Snape paused, either considering that or about to fly off the handle.

"If I win," Dazai rubbed his chin in thought. *What did he want from Snape...?*

"I said we're not betting anything. I am not gambling with a child."

“Obviously we’re gambling,” Dazai said. *“Ah!* If I win, I want one of your ugly coffee mugs!”

Snape blinked several times. His annoyance melted away into bemusement. “You want a mug?”

“Sure! So I can make myself tea at school,” Dazai beamed, eyes already searching around the table and shelf for one he particularly liked. They were all really awful—bright colors, flashy designs, and kitschy sayings that had Dazai cringing. “That’s hardly something you can object to. It’s not like we’re betting anything serious.”

“...I see,” Snape said.

Without saying anything more, Snape set his cards on the table and slid two of them into a pile. Then, he took two new cards off of the original stack. Snape’s new hand had the corners of his eyes pinching satisfactorily.

Dazai’s grin was splitting. “You’re playing!”

Snape’s lips twitched upwards for half-a-second. “I am. Draw you cards, Problem Child.”

“Yes, sir!” Dazai energetically swapped out three of his cards.

He also smiled—more due to amusement than having drawn a good hand. He’d managed one pair of twos and nothing more. Certainly, Snape’s hand was better and would be winning the game. A terrible and dramatic defeat! Snape’s hidden smile belied his win!

How terrible for the man, then, that he’d let Dazai do the shuffling.

Snape sorted his cards, then laid them down in a precise order. A five, six, seven, eight, and nine. All of varying suits. He’d pulled a straight.

“I expect at least two bites of soup,” he told Dazai.

“So confident,” Dazai nodded approvingly. Then, with a sweetened smile, he laid down his own hand.

Four tens.

Snape sputtered. *“Wh*—you won!?”

Dazai laughed loudly. The boisterous movement hid how he slipped his original hand into the sleeve of his shirt. Naturally, he’d swiped some of the more impressive cards out of the deck while shuffling. It wasn’t like Snape had noticed—so did it really count as cheating? Dazai had plucked out the queens, one of the kings, one of the jacks, and two of the aces. And, of course, all four tens. The deck was considerably thinned, and Dazai was actually a little surprised Snape hadn’t called him on it.

“I usually have such bad luck,” Dazai said while preening. “What a surprise! I’m sure it won’t happen again.”

Snape swiped their cards off the table, fussed with them for a moment, then redealt them.

Dazai leaned into the palm of his hand, smiling. “Again? You seemed like you didn’t want to play before. Or maybe Snape is just a sore loser.”

“Detention.”

“Sure, if you win.” Dazai pretended to look at his cards. Under his sleeve, he was readying a royal flush. “I’m taking that mug, by the way.” He indicated to the tea now cooling at Snape’s side.

Snape faltered with his cards, blinkingly looking to his mug then Dazai. *“World’s Okayest Professor...”* he read aloud, trailing. His brows now furrowed in confusion rather than irritation. “Why?”

Dazai merely shrugged. “I like that one best,” he said simply. “But I’ve already won it, and I really don’t want two mugs. So if I win this time, I want your book.”

He patted the potions textbook beside him in point.

Again, the professor looked somewhat befuddled with Dazai’s command. He quickly shook it off and glared instead. “I’m hardly giving you my things.”

“Not *giving—losing*. I have to win fair and square. It’s hardly my fault if you lose.”

Dazai slotted an ace in the bandages on his wrist.

They held a silent staring contest for several long moments. Snape, glaring. Dazai, cheerful.

At last, Snape relented with a huffy sigh. “Fine. You can have that book if you win. If not, you eat all your soup. And do all your homework for the month.”

Dazai could have laughed—Snape was too easy!

But he didn’t. Instead, he made a show of peeking at his cards again. Dazai set them back down. Then he gestured to the deck, indicating that they should draw again before confirming the new bet.

Snape agreed with a grunt. He traded in only one of his cards.

Dazai pretended to hem-and-haw over it for a few dragging seconds. Only then did he pick two random cards to redraw. The cards themselves didn’t really matter. The secret hand within his sleeve did, and it had already won him this game.

Sharing a confirming look, both players revealed their hands.

Snape laid down a flush.

Dazai flicked his wrist, and the garbage hand he’d been collecting replaced itself with the royal flush. He flared his hands out, showy. The cards were revealed in a triumphant throw

between them.

Snape's mouth dropped open. He leaned forward to squint at Dazai's hands, as if not really believing they could be there. His eyes flicked rapidly between Dazai and the cards.

Meanwhile, Dazai was clapping. "I won again! Hey, what are the odds?"

Almost impossibly low, was the answer. Of course, he didn't say this aloud.

Snape stared.

Now, Dazai did laugh. In fact, he laughed so hard that he snorted.

All the while, Snape stared at him, bewildered and shocked. It took several seconds to shake himself from his stupor. When he did, he was scowling. "How are you doing that?"

"What?"

"Winning," Snape glowered. "That hand was too good."

Dazai gasped, hand flying to his chest. "What are you accusing me of?"

"Cheating," Snape said dully.

"As if Snape actually saw me do anything. He's just guessing, right?" Dazai sniffed. "What a sore loser. I can't believe you're my favorite professor."

Snape blinked, looking a little stupefied. *"Favorite...* If I'm your favorite, you should participate in class."

"I make poisons every class!"

"Potions," Snape corrected. "You should be making *potions* every class."

Dazai waved him off, like it was the same thing. With the other hand, he took all the cards off the table and made work of shuffling them again. An intentional flick of his wrist had the stolen cards returned to their port. He folded them again, precise. Then he dealt them cards five each.

Snape watched him for a moment longer, blatantly suspicious and watching Dazai's hands for any sign of underhanded tricks. He wouldn't find any. Not this time.

When he finally tore his eyes from Dazai to look at his cards, his eyes widened minutely.

Dazai hid a smirk behind a sip of honeyed tea.

This time, his clever hands had given Snape the win.

He asked Snape if he was going to draw, and Snape shook his head. Dazai traded three of his cards just to see what he would get.

He laid down a pair of eights. *"Bah,* you think I can win with this?"

"No," Snape said, sounding somewhat skeptical despite it. He flipped his cards to reveal his full house—two kings and three fours. "I win."

"See? Snape has some luck too," Dazai said. "No need to blame me for everything."

In truth, he'd picked a few cards from the deck and sorted them on top. All it had taken after that was dealing their hands out in a certain order. But judging by Snape's narrowed eyes, the man still didn't quite believe there wasn't more than chance at play. Probably, Dazai was being too flashy with so many high-scoring/low-chance hands. But he wasn't trying to be subtle. He was just having fun. Passing time, distracting Snape.

Dazai waved a solitary ace.

Snape looked between his cards and Dazai's skeptically. He blinked, like he suddenly remembered something. His head snapped to meet Dazai's eyes. "Eat your soup."

"Huh? No way."

Snape's lip curled. "I won. What happened to *winning fair and square?"*

"Sure you won. But we didn't bet this round." Dazai beamed, and Snape's teeth ground together painfully. "Could it be? Is Snape a *sore winner* too?"

"You—" Snape stop-started. Annoyance and frustration turned his face a tomato kind of red. "—brat," he finished sharply. "You did that on purpose."

Dazai chuckled. "You've got no sportsmanship," he accused teasingly. He collected the cards again and started another shuffle. "Another round?"

"No," Snape said, annoyance clearly still peppering his expression. Dazai thought to laugh at him, but pouted instead. "It's getting late."

"Oh, is that the only reason?" Dazai bantered. He tapped his nails noisily on the potion textbook as a reminder of what Snape had lost.

Snape's left eye twitched. "Enough."

Dazai set the cards down, placating.

"It's late, and we have an early train to catch tomorrow," he reiterated. "You can borrow some of my pajamas to sleep in. I don't have a spare room, so you'll be comfortable on the couch. Understood?"

"Understood."

That was well and good. Dazai had certainly slept in worse places than a dusty couch. Although, he was actually more concerned with...

“A change of clothes?” He made a face. “I’m fine in this.”

Snape raised a brow. “I’m uncomfortable just looking at you.” His eyes roved over Dazai’s tight tie, his stiff coat, his belted slacks... “You won’t be able to sleep in that.”

“I’ll figure it out,” Dazai said. He doubted he'd manage sleep regardless.

“There’s no need. This is easier.”

Dazai wanted to protest again, but felt there was no point in it. Not when Snape was already rising to his feet with a grunt and collecting their cold or empty bowls from the table. He levitated their dishes to the kitchen with a muttered spell. Once the table was cleared, Snape nodded to himself. He turned to what was presumably the bedroom.

But just before leaving his eyes flicked to the card deck.

Dazai followed his gaze, curious. He’d left the ace of hearts on top.

Snape sighed. Loudly.

“Keep the cards. They must be cursed.”

Dazai blinked several times, sure he must have heard incorrectly. The words hung in the air, unanswered, for another few seconds longer.

Then, Dazai burst out in exhilarated laughter.

Snape’s lips curled into a smile. Small and fond.

Dazai warmed to share it.

-

Later that night, in the thick of a shadowed forest’s midnight, Dazai lied on Snape’s couch sleepless. He stared up at the ceiling. There was a cup of tea beside him that the professor had charmed to stay warm through the night. If Dazai was careful with his fingers, it would stay steaming until the morning finally arrived. Snape’s pajamas were too big on him. They hung off his frame. Dazai felt a bit like a skeleton in them. He’d kept Mori’s coat on his shoulders, and felt more like a corpse still.

The unfamiliarity of the whole situation—the low ceiling, the honey tea, the comfortable clothes—kept Dazai’s mind alight with swirling thoughts.

He shuffled the cards with one hand. Knifed his index finger in the other.

Only saw half the ceiling with his good eye.

Unwelcome, Dazai's mind returned to Yokohama. To his stiff bed—or the dog kennel. The red lamp in his room. The secret compartment in his desk filled with broken razor blades.

Comfortable.

Sleepless.

Unreconcilable.

Instead of dreaming, Dazai dealt himself a royal flush.

Chapter End Notes

i'm gonna be honest, this chapter really got away from me. but i'm not about to pretend this fic has ever been anything other than silly self-indulgent fun so lolll

thanks for reading, happy birthday, and so on!

next up: answering the age-old question, "what is poppy up to?"

Poppy

Chapter Summary

Back at Hogwarts!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the train to Hogwarts, Dazai talked Snape's ear off about potions. It kept the professor from asking unwanted questions or from staring too long in that contemplative silence Dazai really wasn't liking. The only stares he received this way were ones of stupefaction.

When the train finally rolled into its final destination, Snape blinkingly said, "You're actually reading that book? You understand it?"

His eyes narrowed on the hard-won textbook in Dazai's lap. Sitting atop it was his *'World's Okayest Professor'* mug and a deck of cards. Also in Dazai's lap was a worn pair of too-large pajamas. They were Snape's, but the professor had told him to keep them. *'I'm not doing your laundry,'* Snape had told him pointedly, *'Save me the trouble and take those with you.'* And while they were officially the most comfortable thing Dazai owned, he doubted he'd ever wear them again. Mori was in charge of buying Dazai's clothes, after all. And the boss had... different tastes.

Mori's coat hung thickly over his shoulders in point.

Dazai shrugged. "It's pretty straight forward," he said, which wasn't a lie. Potions were more interesting than Dazai had originally thought, actually. Ingredients weren't added at random, and nothing about the process was arbitrary. Every addition to the cauldron was perfectly calculated. Beozar balanced out frog's tongue. Stirring thrice activated the intrinsic magical properties of staurolite, while stirring twice only changed its color. Dazai was starting to really appreciate the logical calculation that went into potion making.

Math and chemistry, not feelings and sensations. Much more to-the-point, he thought.

Snape hummed, tone indiscernible. He turned an assessing eye onto Dazai, like he was once again not quite believing what he was seeing. Dazai was getting somewhat used to that look. But that didn't change the fact it always left him feeling like he'd said something he shouldn't.

Still, Snape walked Dazai down the train without objection. Dazai clutched his new belongings to his chest to keep from dropping them. Luckily, there weren't many people on board. The students were still on break for some time yet. And the other passengers gave

them a wide berth upon identifying the Demon Student. Mostly, only train staff was present today.

Just as they hopped off the train and into the station, Dazai heard a staff-member comment, *"have you found it yet? The monster from the other day? I'm petrified I might find it every time I open a compartment."*

"No. Thank Merlin, I think it flew away. At least none of the passengers have seen it since. Think we'd lose our jobs if a wild monster was aboard all this time?"

"I heard it was only a pixie."

"Really? I thought it was a fire salamander bat."

"...Hey. What in Merlin's name are you talking about?"

Snape's eyes flicked to them, bewilderment flashing across his face.

Dazai tugged on his sleeve. He physically tore Snape away from that conversation. In no way did he want to talk about Egg's second escapade right now.

"Hey, if a cauldron was lined with copper, would that have any impact on the potency of a pepperup potion?" Dazai bounced around Snape's side to ask, effectively blocking the train staff from view. "Because—"

Snape side-eyed him. The confusion mottling his face dropped into something dry. "With all these questions, I'm to assume you'll be passing my next test, boy."

Dazai's mouth snapped shut.

Snape watched him for a moment longer. When he looked away, there was a small upwards curve on his lips. "But if you ask me the same question in class, I may be inclined to answer."

Dazai chuckled.

They walked mostly in silence to Hogwarts. The path was quiet today, as no other students took the path alongside them. Seeing as there were no thestrals waiting for them, Snape and Dazai had to walk the whole way themselves. It wasn't particularly long—though magical dead horses certainly would have made faster work of it. Dazai didn't mind—mostly. It only bothered him that Snape kept shooting his not-so-surreptitious glances while they walked.

For his part, Snape seemed to be walking fast on purpose. Apparently, he had somewhere to be.

Meanwhile, Dazai was only planning to change into his school robes and visit the library.

Some research to start off his second semester! Though, perhaps starting with his interrogation of Tom Riddle should come first. In which case, the privacy of his office would do better...

The school's massive doors swung open of their own accord. The heightened amount of magic inhabiting Hogwarts immediately tickled Dazai. But within a few seconds, it quieted down into something more familiar. A quiet pressure. Habitual. Dazai easily shrugged it off.

They walked inside, and the door shut itself behind them.

Snape let out a long sigh upon entering. His shoulders melted, and Dazai suddenly realized how much stress the man had been carrying since the party. His face relaxed minutely, but there was still a characteristic tension in his jaw.

Right. In no way did Dazai want to trip into another interrogation with Snape right now. Certainly not when he was making an expression like that.

Dazai was about to excuse himself to the office, when someone called out to them.

"Severus, you're—" Professor McGonagall started. Immediately upon seeing Dazai at his side, however, she stilled. For a second, confusion lit her expression when she saw the mug and book in his hands. But it was quickly replaced with shock paling her face. She gaped at his bandages and eye bags. She looked hastily to Snape for explanation. "What happened?"

Snape shook his head gravely. "Later," he said.

McGonagall, clearly displeased at being ignored, levelled her coworker with a glare.

"Is Poppy back yet?" he asked instead.

McGonagall's lips pursed. Her gaze briefly flicked to Dazai then back, apparently reading Snape's intentions. "Not yet. I thought she was the one going to get him."

Dazai startled.

What?

What did McGonagall mean? He hadn't seen Pomfrey at the Malfoy Ball, only Snape. And further, Snape had done nothing to indicate Pomfrey's presence at the house yesterday. She wasn't at the party.

But she was looking for him.

That only left one conclusion. But...

Dazai's eyes narrowed.

McGonagall couldn't be talking about Poppy going to Yokohama.

...could she?

"I see... Gilderoy?"

Dazai forced himself out of his thoughts. There was no changing Poppy's whereabouts now. He'd have to send Mori a letter later, though. Inquiring about the matron's possible activities. Likely, she would just be turned away at the city's borders. But Dazai was an executive now. He should at least attempt due-diligence.

"No." She crossed her arms. "Severus, what is going on? Why is he here, and not at St. Mungo's, where he so clearly needs to be?"

Snape's lip curled in something like disgust. Dazai raised a curious brow at the expression.

"I don't trust them," he spat.

"Severus, he obviously needs medical attention." McGonagall took a step forward. Worry and irritation peppered her expression.

"I've looked at it myself. It is..." he trailed off, swallowing thickly. Then, "There is no emergency that cannot wait for Poppy's return." Here, Snape leveled McGonagall with a significant look. "And I would rather not be having this particular conversation out here where anyone could bother us."

McGonagall paused, and apparently couldn't refute that point. After a moment, she nodded grimly. "We'll talk," she cast another stressed gaze onto Dazai, "in my office."

Snape nodded. He took several steps towards McGonagall, intending to leave now.

Instinctively, Dazai made to follow.

"Get settled in, Problem Child," Snape stopped him. "I will handle this."

"If you're going to be talking about me, I want to come with."

Snape turned up a brow. "I was under the impression you didn't want to talk about your homelife."

Ah...

"I'll only be listening. Very polite and quiet—"

Snape snorted.

"—so I can hear you make things up about me."

Immediately, Snape made a face at that. He apparently wasn't believing Dazai's *'you've greatly misinterpreted my homelife'* testimony. Dazai hadn't really expected him to. It was fine.

Snape sighed.

"You have had a long few days," Snape told him. "Relax. Let us handle this now."

Dazai watched him for a long moment with a passive expression—hoping to give off the impression that Snape was hardly the boss of him and he'd be doing whatever he wanted, regardless of permissions. But given that Snape was scowling about seventy-percent of the time anyway, it was hard to tell if he got the message.

He shrugged. Dazai supposed it didn't really matter, anyway. More time to bother Riddle. Less time to fuss over Snape's inane pet-project. That was likely for the best. He'd maybe kill himself if he had to hear Snape worry over his well-being again. *Blegh.*

Anyway, it wasn't like Snape could really get in his way. Yokohama was impenetrable as always. Snape was welcome to try bashing his head against that particular wall if he really wanted.

Settled, Dazai relented. "Fine," he huffed. "You're so annoying, Sir."

Snape clicked his tongue. "Detention tomorrow."

"Yeah, yeah."

Snape made a face that wasn't exactly disgruntled. Dazai wiggled his fingers menacingly.

Meanwhile, McGonagall was looking between the two of them, expression thoughtful.

She cleared her throat. They stopped bickering immediately.

"Severus," she reminded him with a stern tone.

Snape blinked, then nodded. "Right." He took another step to McGonagall's side, ready to leave. But first, he cast a final glance back to Dazai. "Stay out of trouble. Do not look for the basilisk."

McGonagall choked on her spit. *"Basilisk!?"*

"I'm on my best behavior," Dazai responded, chipper.

Snape sighed, sounding deeply aggrieved. "That's what I'm afraid of."

And with that, a stoic Snape and a bewildered McGonagall left down the hall.

Dazai let out his breath once they were gone. His shoulders fell, no longer the stiff line they'd drawn up into. Whatever cheerfulness had found itself on his face melted away without an audience. Dazai stood in the empty atrium for several long moments. It was dark at his back where a closed door blotted the sun out.

Back at Hogwarts again.

He'd thought it might make him feel better to be back here, but all Dazai felt now was tired.

He wondered what Mori thought about this turn of events. If he approved of Dazai letting Snape take him back here, or if the boss would have preferred he just kill Snape outright. But

Dazai had filtered through the options and... *yes.* This was the right decision. He was sure of it.

Absentmindedly, Dazai's nails had found their place at his wrist. Scratching.

He had all his ducks in a row, surely. Gang members all kept at an arms-length—save for Blaise and Draco who had more use to him. Snape was a different kind of problem. But he was also never going to make headway on his concerns, so that was fine.

Probably.

Certainly. He wouldn't let it.

(Dazai wasn't attached to *Snape,* of all people. That would be absurd.)

The atrium was massive—taller than anything had a right to be, really. It was fancy stonework and red bricks in a staggered pattern. A chandelier—too high above to really see—was lit even in the middle of the day. So towering and extravagant. Dazai imagined it collapsing on him. Suffocating every last breath out of him. Bricks crushing his bones. His lungs deflated.

Something sticky clogged his nail.

Drat!

Dazai hastily pulled his hand away from his wrist. The cuts there were new—new enough to tear open. And there Dazai had gone, letting his thoughts wander and scratching mindlessly at the wounds until they re-opened. Small blots of red changed the color of his bandages.

He clicked his tongue.

Dazai took the hall to his left upon realizing this. Standing still would do him no good. He'd look for the office right now. Draft a letter to Mori requesting instruction, if any were available. Then he'd question Riddle about the Chamber of Secrets.

Although, this was all much easier said than done. Because the instant Dazai arrived at the top of a spiral staircase, his surroundings were no longer familiar and he was lost.

Of course.

Dazai slumped, utterly defeated. Even though it had only been a short while, he'd readjusted to life in Yokohama swiftly. Living in a building he understood—even for just a few days... what a luxury! Now he was going to wander ever-changing halls until he got lucky or died.

He passed several familiar and unfamiliar paintings and ignored them. They wouldn't help at all. Most of the paintings were scared of him. And when they did give advice, it was so illogical as to be impossible to follow. Generally, Dazai's feet could find their way to the library wherever he was. An automatic process guiding him there thoughtlessly. Hopefully, today would be no different. At least then he would have a sense of—

“—just around here, I think.”

Dazai perked up. He knew that voice!

“—so it says. But isn’t it too early—”

Excited, Dazai’s pace quickened until he was coming around a nearby corner.

Immediately, Fred and George Weasley came into view. They were each wearing one of those infamous Weasley Christmas sweaters—though, squinting, Dazai realized they had swapped each other. The “F” was on George’s sweater, while the “G” was on Fred’s.

They were standing hunched over the Marauder’s Map, tracking something with their eyes and fingers. When Dazai turned the corner and bounded over to them, their eyes snapped up.

“Dazai!” Fred chirped. “We just saw your name and were coming to find—”

He cut off with a ragged, shocked breath.

Beside him, George made a choking sound.

They were staring at his bandaged eye.

“It’s a good thing you two were looking. I’m lost again, would you believe,” Dazai told them, pointedly ignoring their searching gazes.

He... should have expected this. Had, to some extent. But also very much did not understand what the fuss was about. Last time he’d worn an eyepatch—over a year ago, now, and before his time at Hogwarts—no one had given him a second glance!

Bother.

Still, the wound *was* ugly. And it did hurt something awful—Dazai hated pain but he also had a tolerance for it, so that was saying something. But it was astounding how shocked people could be about such an injury! His eye had been there, and now it wasn't. Dazai had catalogued the wound as just another thing that was empty about him. A fact of nature. But Snape, and Draco, and Blaise... they had just kept looking at it. Like it was something grave and unimaginable. Dazai wanted to hear no more of it.

But judging by how the twins rushed to him, he didn’t think they’d let him off so easy.

Drat again, Dazai thought bitterly. He pasted a smile on, regardless. He really was relieved to see them.

George hesitated just shy of cupping his cheek. Fred hovered nervously at his side. It was unusual to see them so uncertain, and Dazai tensed up automatically.

He made a gesture like shaking them off, but the twins were hardly deterred.

“What happened?” Fred said. His voice was strangely low. Pointed.

Dazai was getting really sick of hearing that question.

"Hm? I'm trying out a more villainous look," he joked, and lifted an arm to indicate his new coat as well. The long, black silhouette only made him appear more menacing. "It'll give those nerds at the Daily Prophet something to write about."

Fred and George shared one of their looks.

"Dazai, I love jokes as much as the next guy. But grievous wounds on my little brother are *not even remotely funny,"* George said haltingly. He leaned in to see the gauze. When he pulled back there was a sour look on his face like he'd decided something. "Please don't joke about the *massive bundle of bandages on your face that wasn't there a week ago."*

"Serious time now, Snakey," Fred agreed, tone low. "What happened?"

Dazai glowered. "I've already gotten an earful from Snape about this. Let it go."

"Not possible," they said at the same time.

Damn. Dazai tried a pout next—puppy dog eyes and everything!

"Tell us what happened," George said, and Fred finished, "I promise, we'll make whatever did that—*whoever* did that, regret it."

"What?" Dazai asked, laughing a little despite himself. "You'd commit a murder for me?"

"Yes," they said immediately.

Dazai blinked, utterly bewildered. He took a step back. *"Ah...* there's no need for that."

And while the twins looked briefly guilty, they didn't relent. They wore the most serious looks Dazai had ever seen on them before. Even in the thick of danger last year with the guards, they hadn't looked so severe. Dazai felt a trill of trepidation run up his spine. He forcefully smothered it.

Still, the twins had always been good at reading him.

A second later, George stepped back to give Dazai some breathing space. He nudged his brother, and Fred reluctantly pulled away as well.

Dazai spoke before they could get anymore ideas. He lifted his things—Snape's mug standing out as most unusual among them. "Will you help me find the office? I've got things to set down."

They inspected him with narrowed eyes for another moment before saying in one voice, "Sure. Trust the boss to get lost going to the place he's at everyday."

Dazai shrugged like it couldn't be helped. "That's what I keep you around for."

George chuckled, but something about it felt forced.

“But only,” Fred said purposefully, “because Madam Pomfrey went home over break! Otherwise we’d be taking you straight to her!”

“We should still go. I bet we can figure out her medicine cabinet.”

“Bet Perc would give us a pass, if we did. Just this once...”

They trailed off. Clearly, this was a serious consideration for them.

Silently, Dazai cursed his father’s ghost. Couldn’t he have stabbed Dazai somewhere less conspicuous? This was all sorts of annoying!

As always, people fussed over the strangest of things.

Thinking this, he preemptively hid the now-bloody part of his wrist.

Dazai pushed past it best he could—knowing still that the twins had a bone they weren’t ever going to let go of. Dogs! All of his stupid friends were dogs!

Evidently reaching the end of their conversation, the twins shared an affirming nod. Then, in one swoop, each wrapped an arm around Dazai’s shoulders. They guided him down the hall. Though, it was less *guiding* and more *lifting him off the floor and carrying him.* Semantics.

Carted along, Dazai made himself relax. They’d done this before: picked him up and taken him somewhere. And though Dazai always made a point to complain about it, he trusted they wouldn’t take him anywhere terrible. Once they made it to the office, Dazai would fake some lie about *not wanting to talk about it,* and the twins would stop bothering him about his eye. Though, he really *didn’t* want to talk about it. Just probably not for the reason those two would inevitably think.

Still, for the show of it, he grumbled, “You two are always so rough with your boss. I should have you fired.”

“It’s a part of our job!” They said.

Dazai rolled his eye.

As they dragged him down one corridor and the next, Dazai let his mind wander. What he would say to get them off his back, how he would word his next letter to Mori, what he would ask Riddle later...

When the twins let him down, Dazai blinked owlishly at their surroundings for several long seconds.

“This isn’t the office,” he said dumbly.

Fred and George winked at him.

In front of them, the painted lady of Gryffindor sneered.

“Nope,” Fred said.

“Even better,” George continued, “home sweet honorary home!”

Dazai looked between them. He quirked a brow. “Do I not pay you two enough? I said the office.”

“You don’t pay us at all,” Fred corrected him easily. “Ignoring all the money our scheme drags in, that is.”

“That’s your payment,” Dazai told him dryly. “That, and the pleasure of my leadership.”

“Regardless! This is so much better, Snakey. Because Percy’s a prefect, so he can let us into the infirmary!”

“I told you, Snape already looked at.”

While George told the Painted Lady her secret code-of-the-week, Fred said, “I know you like Professor Snape, but he’s actually maybe the worst professor in the whole school. I’ve seen Neville cry at just the sight of him. We don’t exactly trust him with finer stuff like this.”

“He’s... fine,” Dazai said, only half-sure why he was defending his professor.

Fred nodded, but didn’t seem quite like he agreed.

So when George opened the door and beckoned them inside, Dazai told them, “Forget about Snape, then. Mori looked at it. Surely you can trust an actual doctor.”

They crossed the threshold.

“Don’t take this the wrong way—”

“—or do, that’s fine too—”

“—but I think, maybe just a little—”

“—we trust your dad less?” Fred finally finished.

Dazai stared between them, blinking.

“You’ve never even met him,” he argued. *But then again...* “Wait, actually, you're right. Mori is an awful person all around. But patching me up is the only thing he’s ever consistent at. So it's fine this once.”

Because Mori would never let him die. Of that, Dazai was unfortunately certain.

“Uh huh,” the twins hummed. “Not exactly inspiring confidence there, Boss.”

Dazai rolled his shoulders, uncomfortable with all the attention his eye was getting him. He probably should have expected it, but had imagined in a burst of hopeful denial that no one

would ask. The wound still stung, anyway. And he didn't want to re-live the scalpel gouging his face every single time someone asked.

"You two, I thought I said to stay put—*Oh.* Dazai is here?"

Dazai's eyes flicked up to see Percy standing stiffly by the lit fireplace. His "P" sweater was worn proudly. When he saw Dazai was with the twins, his scolding expression shifted into something unreadable. His eyes widened when they landed on his bandage—*because of course they did.*

Dazai shook himself from his thoughts. "Good afternoon, Percy," he said, smilingly. "I missed Hogwarts *soooo* much I had Snape bring me back early!"

Percy frowned at the explanation, and the twins each put a hand on his shoulder. Dazai made to shrug them off. And though George relented, Fred's hand stayed firm.

"Professor Snape picked you up himself?" Percy asked. When Dazai confirmed this, Percy's lip twitched oddly. He inspected Dazai's eyepatch, and evidently reached some conclusion on it. His expression was somewhere between cordial and grim. "I see... welcome back."

"It's good to be back!" He chirped. "There's always something interesting going on at Hogwarts."

Percy shifted, and Dazai eyed the movement.

George made a noise. "Were you bored at home?"

"I was!" Dazai put some extra cheer in his voice, though he felt very little of it. "I took a dancing lesson that made me dizzy, and Mori got me a new coat." He lifted his arms to indicate his Port Mafia joining gift. It swallowed him like a cloak or a casket. *"Boring."*

"You can dance?"

"Reluctantly. I'd rather die than do a partner dance, though."

Percy raised a hand, stopping Dazai from distracting the conversation further. Their eyes all snapped to him.

"I am... glad you enjoy your stay here." He cleared his throat. Then, predictable as ever, said, "Though I think you know I have to ask—as a prefect—your eye—"

"Is fine," Dazai finished, not needing to hear the question asked. *Again*. Because of this, quite a bit of irritation snaked into his tone. The annoyance was genuine, and showed on his face because of it. "Promise. It's only because healing spells would make me sick, I have to keep it wrapped up. Everything is—" he made a recognizable *'OK'* gesture with his thumb and index finger. "—A-OK. Now stop asking."

Fred cleared his throat, hand tightening slightly on Dazai's shoulder. When Dazai squirmed, uncomfortable, Fred's eyes briefly lit with guilt. Only then did he finally remove his hand.

Dazai let out a muted breath.

It was quiet for a moment. Clearly, the twins were waiting for Percy to pass judgement. They expected him to fuss over the wound, but Dazai wasn't as sure. He and Percy were barely acquainted, after all. Though, if he was anything like Gemma, Percy would do anything for the wellbeing of students. Then again, Dazai wasn't exactly Gryffindor.

"...I see," Percy said after pause. "If that's the case, you'll see Madam Pomfrey when she returns."

"Ah... Snape said that, too."

Percy nodded. "Good. In the meantime—though it *is* against Gryffindor principles—I suppose you may stay in our common rooms. The twins have already dragged you here, anyway. And it's only the five of us for the while."

Only the Weasleys stayed over break, huh?

"Come on, Perc!" Fred argued. "He's hurt! Let us sneak him into the infirmary for a check-up!"

Percy raised a brow. But something about it seemed forced, Dazai thought. "Honestly, I'm surprised you two came to me in the first place."

"Well, we thought you would agree. Even Percy would break a few rules if it was for a hurt little Snakey-Wakey!"

"Don't call me that," Dazai grumbled.

Percy considered them for a moment—his expression pinched when looking at Dazai again. He confirmed, "Professor Snape already looked at it?"

Dazai nodded. "Cleaned and re-wrapped it, too."

"In that case," Percy folded, then unfolded his arms. He turned to his brothers. "You two, stop bullying Dazai. If he doesn't want to talk about what happened and a staff member has already cleared him, you shouldn't be forcing him around. That's tantamount to harassment."
"But—"

Percy raised a silencing hand.

The twins protested louder.

Dazai sighed. He was getting a headache.

Deciding he wanted to be a part of this discussion no longer, Dazai invited himself further into the Gryffindor rooms. As always, they were much warmer than the dungeons. But there was a perpetual chill on his spine—despite the heavy coat hanging off him. Dazai took the seat closest to the fireplace.

It did little to fix the deeply set chill in his blood, but his skin was nicely warmed by it.

He sighed.

"Oh, Dazai. Hello. I thought you'd... gone home?"

Dazai almost jumped—almost. But he held himself still at the last second, and instead merely craned his neck to where the bedrooms were. Ginny Weasley stood by the door, smiling confusedly his way.

"Ginny! You're looking well," he commented cheerfully.

Ginny beamed. And she *was* looking well. Much, much better than she'd been last time. The deep, dark bags under her eyes were gone. Her hunched figure replaced with a relaxed and friendly one. Ginny's hair was done into a neat braid, and when she crossed the room to sit near Dazai, her steps didn't stumble at all.

She did gasp, however, upon seeing Dazai's face.

Irritation licked at his veins. "Don't ask," he stressed. Then, at her continued bewilderment, he added, "If anyone else asks, I think I'll snap."

There was a shift of movement at the other door—the boys dormitory.

"Dazai? What are you—*woah, mate what happened to your eye!?"* Ron startled.

"I'll bite you," Dazai said. Dead serious.

He snapped his teeth for good measure.

Ron blinked several times, stupefaction written plain across his face. But weary self-preservation won out, and he didn't pry further. Moreover, he sat as far opposite he could from Dazai—who bit the air again to boot. *"Yikes...* why are we friends again?"

Dazai grinned at him toothily.

Ron responded only by making a face and shifting further into his seat. When he did so, a small, black blob shuffled out from his robes and onto his shoulders. Tiny claws scrappled for surface.

Angel blinked two beady eyes at him.

Now, it was Dazai's turn to look disgruntled.

Unaware of the staring contest Dazai had picked up with Ron's pet, Ginny cleared her throat to get his attention. Dazai stuck his tongue out at Angel then turned to face her.

"Hm?"

She bit her lip. *"It's not, umm..."* she looked around nervously and whispered, *"to do with... uhh..."*

Here, she mimed writing in the air.

And though she was clearly trying to keep the gesture subvert, Dazai still easily read her train of thought. That, and the guilty way she was looking him up-and-down made it pretty obvious.

The diary didn't do that, did it? she was asking. *I didn't do that?*

Dazai smiled, consoling. He found a quick lie to put on his tongue, *"Ah,* no, no. I got mugged."

At the door, Fred, George, and Percy simultaneously ceased their bickering with a gasp. A second later, the twins had rushed to his side and were frantically patting the air around him as if to soothe some invisible miasma.

"You were *what?"*

"Why didn't you say?!"

"You know I like to be evasive," Dazai answered, cheeky.

"You're going to give us heart attacks, Snakey!"

"Mugged?!"

Percy came up behind them. A hand on each of the twins' shoulders had them backing off reluctantly.

Dazai covered his ears. "Stop yelling. Even Snape didn't yell this much."

"Well, maybe he should have!" Fred and George said together, emphatic. "You were attacked!"

"I guess," Dazai waved them off.

"You guess?!"

Again, Dazai brushed their concerns off. This was annoying—and not at all productive.

"I've had worse—you know I have. Now stop fussing, please, it's giving me a headache."

This seemed not to console the twins even slightly. And now the others—save for Ron, who was still watching Dazai twitchily—regarded him with similarly wide-eyed looks. Ordinary people could be such a minefield!

Really, if a little blood sent them spiraling this much, Dazai couldn't even imagine what they would do if they ever had to go to Yokohama. It was unreconcilable. They would trip over

themselves, trying to make sense of all that calculated violence.

Yokohama and Hogwarts...

No. Those two should never touch at all.

-

Poppy shrugged uncomfortably as the Unnoticeable Charm lingered over her for another successive minute. Her strength lay in the healing magics—and while she could use other spells, they were a struggle to maintain at length.

She took a deep breath and carried on.

Poppy walked through the busy streets of Yokohama—all but invisible to everyone but herself. She hadn't been sure, at first, if the spell would be necessary. Now, it hung over her potently.

After arriving at Yokohama's borders, it became abundantly clear: she would not be gaining access legally. For starters, the city had some sort of immigrations system in place. Only certain people were allowed in. Only certain people allowed out. Severus must have been expected, the last few times he visited. Curious... That there were only two paths into the city —a desolate train-station and a long high-way—also struck her as distinctly odd.

Like Hogwarts, she thought. Only accessible by train or apparition.

Moreover, Poppy had been turned away within seconds of providing I.D.

Well...

Don't say Poppy never tried the peaceable option.

After excusing herself to the restroom, Poppy had promptly cast the Unnoticeable Charm on herself. It was a high-level distraction spell she didn't often find use for, but was now thanking her rebellious teen-years for taking the time to learn. The magic washed over her like a veil.

She walked straight past the immigrations officer and onto the train. They didn't even blink her way.

Ignored and forgotten. Just how Poppy wanted it.

Thirty minutes later, she was silently unboarding the train into Yokohama—an invisible passenger.

Then, Yokohama was sprawling out before her.

“Wow.”

She couldn’t help but gasp.

A few muggles twitched her direction at the sound, but their eyes quickly flitted over her, unfocussed. Poppy pursed her lips self-consciously and pushed a little more magic into her spell just in case.

The buildings were massive! Stretching into the sky in the way only muggle buildings did. The streets were bustling with muggles on their phones or other devices. Poppy rarely saw so much muggle technology in one place! It left her, briefly, baffled. A ferris wheel on the horizon was lit up wonderfully even in the middle of the day.

But Poppy didn’t let her eyes linger on the scenery too long. She had a goal—too serious and too anger-inducing to let anything distract her.

Thinking this, she retrieved the slip of paper from her suit jacket (muggle plainclothes, for robes were too conspicuous. Though the Unnoticeable Charm rendered the change rather pointless). It was an old missive between Severus and Mori Ougai, written over a year prior and arranging a meeting between the staff and Mr. Dazai. Included within was a certain address. Dazai’s house.

Steeling her shoulders, Poppy began her exploration of Yokohama.

Though it was a bit difficult with the language barrier, she managed to make some sense of the city’s layout. And what she couldn't, a quick translation spell managed for her. Flashing signs, gesturing people, and a single skyscraper that seemed to tower over all the rest.

But for all entering the city had been strange, Poppy found herself agreeing with Severus’ initial sentiment.

Yokohama was achingly normal.

Well, she assumed. It was difficult to say, with muggle cities. But she was managing quite well. And, despite their suspicions, Poppy saw no sign of magic in the streets—or any other kind of... power.

Honestly, Poppy was still reeling from the reveal of Special Abilities.

But there was no time for distractions—not now that she was working to maintain the Unnoticeable Charm. The longer she kept up the spell, the more she risked magical exhaustion. So Poppy kept her gawking and speculating short. Her focus was on her destination alone.

Dazai Osamu’s house ought to be...

She turned a corner and a brick apartment building came into view. The address on her letter matched the numbers by the door. It was unassuming. Pedestrian. Despite herself, Poppy

found herself thinking that someone with so much character like Dazai should live in a more... interesting house. Perhaps wide, open windows. Or an ornate metal-worked door. Not this apartment building, which looked like it could have belonged in any town on the Earth. On any street corner, anywhere.

Poppy considered the building for a few short moments. Only after realizing she'd need to either knock or use an unlocking charm, did she let the Unnoticeable Charm dissipate. It was like dropping a weight from her shoulders. Poppy let out a tiny breath.

A light-haired boy four steps to her right suddenly jumped at her unannounced appearance.

Poppy smiled at him apologetically.

His eyes narrowed at her, clearly suspicious of... something. Though Poppy didn't worry over it—the boy was a muggle. He would hardly think to suspect magic!

She was about to write him off as a random passerby, when she remembered the location. *Perhaps this boy is a neighbor of Dazai's,* she realized with some excitement. That cleared things up for her nicely.

"Excuse me, my dear," she called.

The boy continued on his way.

Irritation threatened to bite over her, before Poppy suddenly realized she had called out in English. Sheepishly, she cast a translation spell over herself.

"Excuse me," she called again. Though it was English to her ears, the boy would his preferred language. Seeing as they were in Yokohama, Poppy assumed that was Japanese. "Young sir, I—"

He spun around to face her, a kind of scowl on his face. "What?"

Poppy blinked at his tone. Then, pointed a sneer of her own his way. She was hardly in the mood for games. Not when a student of hers was likely being hurt just beyond that door! "This building—you live here?"

He looked to the building, then back to her. *"Uh,"* he said, looking away briefly. Then, with a raised brow he asked, "do you?"

"Ah, I don't," she said. At once, the boy's tension seemed to melt. Curiosity took its place. "A patient of mine does. I was supposed to check up on him today, only he never showed up."

The boy made a face. "And he lives here?"

"Yes. He'd be about your age. Do you know—"

"I don't know anyone who lives here," he cut her off. "And I don't know why you would want to."

Huh? Poppy blinked. This seemed like an affluent part of the city. Pleasant. Clean. Crimeless, like Severus had said. *But it has a bad reputation?*

Interest pooled in her gut, where it mingled with that persistent worry.

The boy continued, cautious, “you’re really looking for some kid who lives here?”

Poppy nodded.

He seemed to consider that for a moment.

Slowly, he raised a hand to point somewhere behind Poppy. She craned her neck around to follow the gesture. After a second of searching, her eyes landed on the tallest building in Yokohama—the one that towered above the rest. It seemed to be casting a shadow over them, even here.

"If it’s that important, go visit him at work, then.”

Poppy considered the building. It was looking down over everything. Massive. It caught the sun and clean windows sparkled. *So Dazai was there—*

Wait a minute.

Poppy whirled back to face the boy. He staggered back half-a-step at the sudden movement.

“Work?” She asked a little shrilly.

He winced. *“Uh, duh?* Everyone knows Port Mafia owns these apartments. If your kid lives here, he works there.”

Port...

...Mafia?

-

Within the next several hours, Dazai and the twins had managed to hide no less than five glitter bombs around the Hogwarts campus. At least three of them wound up in Lockhart’s classroom. One was in Filch’s office. And the last bomb, despite Dazai’s (half-hearted) protests, was now sat in Snape’s classroom.

The *whizzing-pop!* sound of glitter bombs exploding had joyfully marked Dazai's return to Hogwarts proper.

Naturally, Percy had not been invited to their escapades. Ron had stayed back to keep him distracted. Or, Dazai thought ruefully, as an excuse to avoid their shenanigans. Surprisingly, Ginny had tagged along. And though she spent most of the time standing nervously in the hall, there was a bright smile on her face always.

When the sun was nearly setting, Dazai finally excused himself from their games.

"Aww, are you sure, Snakey?"

"Yeah! You can bunk with us in the Gryffindor rooms. Perc won't mind."

"He might mind," Ginny piped up.

"He might," Fred conceded. "But we're very convincing."

George snorted. "Yeah, and Dazai can do some mean puppy-dog-eyes!"

The second he said it—*'eyes'*—something like horror briefly slipped across George's face. His eyes guiltily flicked to Dazai's bandages.

Dazai cleared his throat. After he had all their attention focused again, he said, "I'm sure. But there's some stuff I need to do tonight. And," he brushed at his coat, where a whole bomb's worth of sparkly glitter had at some point taken up residence. When he shook, a snow of glitter fell around his feet. "I need to change."

They laughed. Ginny made a sudden conscious effort to wipe the glitter from her own robes as well.

"If you say so," Fred tittered.

Lucky for Dazai—and partly by design—their shenanigans today had mostly distracted the twins from their earlier worries. They'd stopped walking around him on tiptoes after the first glitter bomb, and their eyes stopped lingering on his eyepatch after the second. And though there was still some residual caution to them, it was only the typical big-brother-ness they always carried.

Dazai was relieved to have avoided any more fussing.

"But you know where to find us if you need us," George said. "For anything."

Well.

He'd avoided most of the fussing.

Some things are just unavoidable, Dazai thought with a sniff.

"I'll probably get lost, if that's the case," he told them cheekily. Dazai spun on his heels to face... a hall. "It's that way, right?"

Fred choked. "To the Slytherin rooms? Absolutely not."

"Bah, I'll figure it out," Dazai said, flapping a hand—much to Ginny's apparent bewilderment—and picking a direction to walk in. "Thanks!"

"No, no, no," George stammered. He hurried to Dazai's side, before the mafioso could wander too far. Dazai paused to look up at him. "I'm not about to let this trainwreck go on. Fred—"

"Me an' Ginny-Winny will head back to the common rooms. You make sure our little snake doesn't get lost?"

"Oh, Fred, it's like you read my mind!"

Ginny rolled her eyes at their cooing antics. Dazai met her eyes and grinned impishly.

Once the twins were done playing, they all said a fair goodnight. Then it was only Dazai and George who remained. They didn't waste time in standing around for long—both Dazai and George far too accustomed to sneaking around to want to linger in one place for long.

He turned to George and commented, "Did anyone ever tell you that you make a good guard dog?"

George snorted. He patted Dazai on the back, and smiled when he didn't pull away this time. Then he began carting Dazai off in a seemingly random direction. "If they have, it was *definitely* you."

"Well, that's because it's accurate." Dazai sniffed. He stepped around George so the boy was walking on his bandaged side—covering the blind spots Dazai couldn't. "I want to go to the office, by the way. None of my things are in the dungeons."

George blinked, but didn't comment on the change. "No?"

Dazai shook his head. When a second later, George turned them left, Dazai assumed it was to correct their pathing. Though he couldn't be sure, as all the hallways here were familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

"How's that?" George asked, squinting down the corridor.

Dazai quirked a brow. "I keep my stuff in the office. It's easier that way for everyone. Anyway," he paused to hop onto the staircase before it could start moving without him, "I'm surprised you haven't noticed. I'm not exactly subtle."

George frowned at that. Possibly, he was envisioning the office in his mind—where Dazai's things were scattered about the place purposefully. His blanket and pillow. His books. Hell, even Featherbrain had taken up a semi-permanent residence there! He shook his head, scowling now. "I wish things could be better."

"Hm?"

"I wish you could feel safe in your own school, I mean," he continued, voice low. Dazai rarely—if ever—heard such a subdued tone on his usually-boisterous subordinate. "But

pranks can't fix that," he muttered.

"It's fine," Dazai told him breezily.

George's face did something funny. "It's really not. Hey, Dazai—you said you were mugged. It wasn't because someone recognized you as the Demon Student, right? I mean, what if someone attacked you here?"

It wouldn't be the first time, Dazai thought unhelpfully. *Quirrell and Pansy...*

And anyway...

Mori's smiling face flashed across his mind's eye.

Dazai wasn't supposed to feel safe here. This was a job. And as long as people wanted him dead, he was doing it properly. Mori needed people to fear him. To create hysteria. So DOE could swoop in and save the day. *Problem created; problem solved.*

Still. The whole situation reeked. Dazai sighed, feeling illogically like he'd been duped somewhere along the way.

Maybe it was because he was missing a chunk of his face, now, but everything felt terribly unbalanced.

"That's what I have you for," Dazai said after a momentary pause.

George blinked out of his thoughts. When he saw how Dazai's lips were quirked upwards, he smiled smally as well. "Yeah?"

"Sure. My loyal guard dogs; you and the other one."

George laughed. "I know you can tell Fred and me apart, Boss."

Dazai's eye slipped shut as they walked and his head tilted back, confident. George's guiding hand wouldn't lead him into trouble. "Can I? I forget," he drawled, and kicked his legs out childishly.

Again, George laughed. It was a little less strained this time. "Even when things are tough, you always act so unaffected," he commented. "It's like you're used to being under fire all the time. I don't know how you do it, Snakey."

"Is that how it seems?"

George hummed.

They walked in a comfortable silence for a few moments. Then, George lightly tapped his shoulder.

"The office," he said.

Dazai blinked his eyes back open. The office door was dead in front of them.

He stretched his arms over his head, playing up a very-real exhaustion. “Thanks, pet,” Dazai said while double-checking his gloves were in place. He opened the door. A square of rainbow-crystal light dyed his shoes immediately. The low sun cast a long leg. “Pick me up here tomorrow morning, or I'll get lost on my way to breakfast.”

George raised a brow at the new nickname, but only answered, “we can’t have that, can we?”

Dazai shrugged, feeling already less inclined to eat without Blaise here to poke him about it. Regardless, playing like this kept his gang in good spirits. And he wanted them at the top of their game. Always.

“Nope,” he popped. “You’re all hopeless without me.”

George rapped a fist on Dazai’s head—light, and carefully avoiding his wound. “Yup!”

“Owww!” Dazai’s head knocked down exaggeratedly from the hit. “Watch it.”

George chuckled, and his hand stretched out to smooth out some of Dazai’s loose curls.

Dazai pouted until George finally stepped back.

“Alright, alright. See ya’ tomorrow, Snakey!”

Dazai raised a hand in farewell, and George did the same—albeit a bit more energetically. Dazai yawned in point, and George wasted no more time in leaving.

Once he was alone, Dazai finally retreated into the office. The door shut behind him with a click. Presumably, it was locking itself to unwanted outsiders. Dazai could only tell that there was a high concentration of magic here, and little else in specific. But the office looked as it always did. His belongings were all in the same place he’d left them before winter break began.

The stain glass window turned his face blue and red.

Dazai shrugged off his coat and laid it out over the back of his chair. Mori’s coat. Half of it sparkled in the yawning light.

From somewhere above, Dazai heard a *cooing* noise. He glanced up, and Featherbrain descended from a beam to latch onto his shoulder. He shrugged at the sudden weight. Featherbrain dislodged herself a second later, and took residence on the desk top instead.

Dazai collapsed into the seat tiredly. It had been a long day. A long week! A long *year*, if he was honest.

Sneaking Egg out on the train, dodging prefects. Father’s death. The Malfoy Winter Ball, Snape stealing him away. Winter break had no right being so jam-packed with activity! Dazai could just melt on the spot. Finally catch up on what sleep he’d been missing—unable to fully rest in either Mori’s or Snape’s presences as he was.

But.

There was no time to sleep now. Dazai knew that.

He didn't need to sleep, anyway. Strictly speaking, he could go much longer without needing to rest. It was only that the reprieve was nice, and helped him to focus.

Dazai smothered a yawn as he retrieved two items: one from his coat pocket, the other from his desk drawer. He set Riddle's diary off to the side for now. First, he needed to draft a letter to Mori. He made quick work of it—they'd spoken just a day ago, and there wasn't much to catch up on. But he *did* need to inform Mori of Madam Pomfrey's suspected whereabouts. Assuming the boss didn't already know.

Penning out the letter didn't take long. A note about Pomfrey, a request for further instruction, and a short, scathing remark about Mori being a quack doctor. Signed, *your favorite executive.*

Dazai folded the paper up once he was sure the ink wouldn't smudge, then tied it to Featherbrain's talon.

She chirped at him questioningly.

"Back to Yokohama. You know the way," Dazai told her. She only tilted her head at him, and he sighed. "Hide a few rats in his new office while you're at it."

Featherbrain chirped again. This time, Dazai made a point of giving her a little shove. And though she protested (loudly, in typical Featherbrain fashion), she did lift into the air. A second later, Featherbrain flew up into the rafters above and didn't return. Dazai eyed her retreat with a raised brow. Apparently, this awful, magic office listened to everyone but him. Even Featherbrain got what she wanted—a secret exit up above.

Dazai puffed out a tired breath now that he was alone again.

On to his second course of business:

Tom Riddle's diary.

He flipped it open to a random page—it didn't matter which, they were all empty. Even so, he could feel the faintest of magics in the book. Riddle was here and waiting.

'Tell me about the Chamber of Secrets,' he wrote.

The reply came a few seconds later. *'Why do you ask, Dazai?'*

'I'm curious,' he penned. *'Are you going to tell me, or shall I toss you in my desk drawer to never use again?'*

'There's no need for that,' Riddle replied almost instantly.

Dazai smirked, though the diary couldn't see it.

‘Supposedly,’ Riddle began, *‘the Chamber of Secrets is an ancient chamber hidden somewhere within the castle. Salazar Slytherin built it himself as a testament to his beliefs.’*

Dazai waited for an explanation. When none came, he begrudgingly asked, *‘Beliefs?’*

‘Pure blood supremacy, of course.’

Ah. Of course.

‘Legend has it, the Chamber will only open again for the true Heir of Slytherin.’

Even just in writing, Dazai could see the reverence Riddle had for that title: *Heir of Slytherin.* He must be the heir himself. Or otherwise was near enough to it, because in no way was Ginny associated with Slytherin politics. Still... Riddle had opened the Chamber on his own accord, then.

Lucius sure had been playing an interesting game.

Next, Dazai had to ask—

‘And that’s where the basilisk lives?’

Riddle stopped writing for a long moment. Then, *‘figured that out, have you?’*

Dazai ignored him. *‘How were you controlling it?’*

‘So eager to stop the petrifications, I see. Knowing won’t help you.’

‘Did I say I was stopping them?’ Dazai asked, letters swooping sardonically. Riddle’s ink stilled, and bled out into a little pool. With his unoccupied hand, Dazai withdrew the knife from Mori’s coat. He took off the one glove to better feel the edge of the blade. Then he flicked it open and closed mechanically. *‘How did you control the basilisk? Ginny doesn’t remember, so she’s no help.’*

Riddle didn’t answer for another second, and Dazai got the impression he was deciding what to say.

That was fine. Dazai had all night—and then some—to needle an answer out of him. Port Mafia’s usual interrogation techniques were only slightly dampened by the fact that Riddle didn’t have a physical body. Lest one wanted to count the pages of a book as a human’s body, that was. Which was about as morbid as trapping a consciousness inside a painting.

Sometimes Dazai really hated Hogwarts.

He pricked his fingertips on the knife while Riddle responded.

‘Parseltongue.’

Dazai frowned at the unfamiliar word, then waited for Riddle to explain. This time, Riddle seemed inclined to do so.

‘The language of snakes. I can speak it, so I can open the Chamber and the basilisk will obey me.’

‘Ginny can’t speak it.’

‘No,’ Riddle wrote, *‘so a fresh kill does just as well. The basilisk is drawn to the scent of blood.’*

Blood...

The message by Mrs. Norris’ body had been written in blood. Thinking about it now, Dazai concluded Riddle-Ginny had likely killed some kind of animal. The basilisk was drawn to the smell of food and petrified Mrs. Norris while it was nearby. Still...

He looked down to his wrist, where a tiny stain of red was staring out at him.

‘That’s awfully haphazard,’ Dazai said, imagining that the basilisk could have petrified just about anyone with that method. Or even petrified no one at all.

‘Nothing is without risk,’ Riddle told him. *‘You’re a clever boy. Surely you know this.’*

Dazai snapped the knife closed over his ring finger. A lance of pain shot through the appendage, and a few seconds later the slice turned bright red. A few drops of blood sluiced down his hand.

Red splashed across the desk. It narrowly missed the diary, where Riddle’s black script was still writing—asking what Dazai planned to do with this information.

Dazai ignored him, for now. His plans were his and his alone. Well, his and Mori’s.

Another drop of blood fell. Dazai stuck the finger in his mouth to staunch the bleeding, and the thick tang of iron coated his tongue a second later.

With his free hand, Dazai shut Riddle closed mid-sentence.

He leaned into the back of his chair—into Mori’s waiting coat—and felt, absurdly, exhausted already.

Dazai bit the wound so it would bleed longer.

-

“See? She’s been there for hours, Sir.”

Hirotsu hummed. A curl of smoke left his cigarette as he stared across the street. Smoking was never as satisfying as after a successful mission, but his fingers had been itching for one ever since Mori's takeover.

Across the street, a grey-haired woman was sitting on the bench. She seemed to be minding her own business. Completely inauspicious. An old lady idling in the middle of a busy city. Occasionally, she would shift in place, or her eyes would wander to the top of the skyscraper and back. But she never did anything more than that. Hadn't even taken out a phone to tap away at. Just... Sitting. Staring. Across from the Port Mafia's main headquarters.

A stranger.

Yokohama didn't have strangers.

He sighed, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

The grunt beside him coughed. "No one noticed her at first, but Takashi saw her on the cameras about half-an-hour ago. She hasn't moved."

"Do you think she's a spy?" Takashi asked, bouncing on his feet at Hirotsu's other side.

"For who?" Hirtosu asked tiredly. For all Port Mafia had enemies, their current biggest problem was *themselves*. Re-settling the dust after the previous boss' death. He tapped his cigarette, and ashes fell around him. Then, he dropped it to the cement and ground it out with the heel of his shoe. "Keep an eye on her. If she leaves, follow her."

"Yes, Sir!"

Hirotsu nodded. Without another word, he turned on his heel back into the building. The receptionist waved politely at him. Hirotsu inclined his head in reply.

He wasted little time with pleasantries, and beelined for the elevator. The guards there—who were typically quite persnickety with letting people past—let Hirotsu ride up to the highest floor without fuss. His reputation preceded him.

The elevator ride lasted over a minute, but made no other stops along its ascension. Finally, the elevator door *dinged* open. Hirotsu waited another full minute for the guards on this floor to let him pass. Naturally, security was tighter on the Boss' floor. Even Hirotsu's prestige couldn't afford him that kind of leniency.

And when Hirotsu was finally permitted entrance, he strolled past the guards as though they had never been there to begin with.

"Boss," he greeted.

Mori didn't turn around from where he was gazing out onto the city below. It stretched out as far as the sea. H*is*.

"Hirotsu, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

“There’s a woman by the entrance. Not of Yokohama,” Hirotsu said. His eyes fell to the desk, where Elise was kicking her legs energetically, dress flashing out with every movement. She didn’t look at him.

Mori hummed. His arms were crossed behind his back, unstressed. “Describe her.”

Hirotsu did. He was clinical to the point of perfection. Mori nodded along like he wouldn’t tolerate any less.

“I see,” the boss tilted his chin, eyes still on the horizon. “She’s a pawn in Dazai’s current job. Though I wouldn’t think she’d come all the way here just for him.”

Hirotsu had been given no information on whatever scheme Mori’d had Dazai running for the last two years. No one had, he didn’t think. Whatever this game was, it was big. And secret. Still. Hirotsu had no desire to be involved if Mori did not require him.

“Shall I dispose of her?” He asked, perfunctory.

Mori considered this for a moment. When he reached a conclusion, he finally turned around to meet Hirotsu’s eyes. In the same motion, his hands came to rest on Elise’s shoulders.

The girl squeaked out a protest, but didn’t squirm away.

Mori’s eyes had taken on a darker shine since becoming boss. Hirotsu could see that, now.

“No,” Mori said. “It would be a problem if her death was in any way connected to Yokohama.”

The sky was turning black behind him. But the city was just coming to life with burning neon lights. The only kind of star you could see in a city like this.

Mori shared with him a private, pointed smile.

“She’s Dazai’s problem, anyhow. He’ll dispose of her personally.”

Chapter End Notes

tried something new this week and updated at a reasonable hour of the day instead of the crack of dawn. wacky stuff

happy birthday, have a good week, etc.

next up: wait what happened to egg??

*
EDIT: Taking a few weeks off updates. Please pay it no mind, and thank you for your patience.

Work, Work, Work

Chapter Summary

Classes start again. Things are going well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

'It became easier over time to control her body,' Riddle had written. *'She yielded herself to me completely.'*

'The Imperius Curse can't be used like this.' Dazai tapped his quill on the diary.

'It's more of a possession.'

Dazai quirked a brow. He envisioned a ghost, stealing Ginny's body, and found the comparison apt. Riddle had always felt distinctly human to him.

Not just an object. Not just a curse.

A person.

Dazai wondered who Riddle had been when he was alive. Or when he was free.

'Ginny Weasley feels so alone. None of her so-called friends understand her,' Riddle continued. *'Her soul made room for mine eagerly.'*

Dazai frowned. *'You make it sound as though she wanted to be possessed.'*

'Everyone is looking for an escape. Even if they don't know it just yet.'

'Even you?' Dazai asked.

'Even you,' Riddle replied.

-

"Hey, if you use the Softening Charm on my heart, do you think it'll stop beating?"

Blaise turned to look at him, blank expression belying nothing of what he thought. His wand hovered over a solid plank of wood. A successful cast of the Softening Charm should turn it

spongy and springy, though Blaise hadn't had any luck with it yet. At least, that's what it had done when Professor McGonagall demonstrated the spell ten minutes prior.

The spell that was half-way out Blaise's mouth silenced immediately. "I'm not going to do that."

"Right," Dazai leaned forward into his folded arms. "A bullet to the brain would be more efficient..."

Blaise stared at him.

Dazai cleared his throat. "But if you did use the softening charm—"

"If I use this spell on you, Professor McGonagall will expel me."

"Hmm... no. I bet people would cheer."

Blaise was giving him an odd look now.

Dazai ignored it by turning away—his bandaged eye on Blaise's side. His good eye roamed the classroom instead.

Second Semester had officially begun, but the classroom—the whole school—was looking bare. Surprisingly, quite a few students hadn't returned for classes. Apparently, parents weren't keen to let their kids learn at a school that had frequent basilisk attacks. Go figure. At least half of the student body hadn't returned at the end of Winter Break, and still weren't here now classes had begun.

It left the whole school feeling... odd. Empty. Like they were all trespassing during the daytime.

Dazai shrugged his shoulders.

Mori's coat shuffled over his back—worn over the Hogwarts uniform. It felt wrong to take it off. Especially so soon after his promotion from *nobody* to *executive*. Snape had eyed him coolly over breakfast that morning, but not told him to take the coat off. So he wore it at least without starting a fight.

It added to his villainous look, anyhow.

Dazai's eye was skipping across a row of empty seats when Blaise said, "You're zoning out."

Dazai rolled back over to face him. He lifted a brow. "I'm thinking."

"Dangerous."

He snorted. "Not for you," he said lightly, then stretched in a manner that could only be likened to a cat. "Just planning out my next nap. Blaise frets too much."

“I fret the right amount,” Blaise said. He eyed Dazai for a second longer, then finally turned back to his assignment. *“Spongify!”*

Dazai felt the familiar turn of transfiguration roll out from Blaise’s wand and onto the plank of wood. He knew before Blaise even poked it that the spell had worked—the once-solid slab of oak fell under his touch. It looked a bit more like a pillow now, actually.

Dazai made grabby hands at it.

Blaise pushed it to him obligingly.

The second he could reach it, Dazai slid it underneath his arms and rested his head on it. Soft.

Yeah. Definitely a pillow.

Still, he was careful to keep his bare skin off of the once-stiff plank. The wood—*the pillow*—didn't have any magic to it. But magic had been cast on it. The annoyingly unspecific sensation of a transfiguration spell had already come and gone. Still. No Longer Human was unpredictable. Almost as unpredictable as magic. Dazai wasn’t exactly certain how No Longer Human would interact with the pillow, but knew he didn’t want to risk anything with an audience.

“Transfiguration is so stupid,” Dazai yawned. He shuffled further into the pillow. “But I might like to learn this spell.”

Blaise hummed somewhere above him. Dazai didn’t know. He’d closed his eye.

Suddenly, a pair of footsteps came to stop directly in front of them.

“Mr. Dazai. Mr. Zabini.”

Blaise shifted beside him, turning in the direction of the stern, scolding voice.

Dazai yawned. Reluctantly, he cracked open his eye.

McGonagall had her arms crossed and a nasty press to her lips. She waited until it was clear Dazai was awake to listen, then said, “Even though you will not be casting spells outside of remedial lessons, Mr. Dazai, I expect you to be reading the textbook. Rather that than distracting your classmate.”

There was a collective shuffle of bodies around them, as the rest of the class turned to see what drama was unfolding now.

With most of the students absent, it was quiet enough that the whole classroom could tune in to listen. Dazai was mostly used to all the staring now, but it still had his hackles raising instinctively. Nothing to do about it, though. Everything was how it ought to be.

Choosing to ignore the small crowd, Dazai glanced to Blaise, then indicated to his new pillow. “He’s already finished.”

“Mr. Zabini is to cast it as many times as he can.”

“Class is almost over! It's only that he's not casting it on my heart like I keep asking hm to."

McGonagall spoke over him, “As for you. The textbook is hardly going to read itself. I expect you to have a good grasp on those concepts before your our Remedial Magics lesson —”

“I finished reading the textbook ages ago,” Dazai told her. He shifted upright enough that McGonagall wouldn’t yell at him for sleeping. Still, he made no move to grab his book. Or bag. Or any of the dozen assignments he was holding on to, but refusing to engage with. “There was a typo on page 108, by the way.”

McGonagall blinked. Her arms unfolded, and something like surprise flitted across her face. Though it passed as soon as it came on, and a stubbornly contemplative frown took its place. “And the essay?”

Several seats ahead of him, Draco suddenly choked on a laugh.

“Ah...”

Dazai trailed off.

“Mr. Dazai,” McGonagall said slowly, as though speaking to a very young child, “Need I remind you that refusal to do your assignments will result in your failing this class.”

“This and every other class,” Pansy testily whispered from her own seat, somewhere off to the left. *“One can only hope.”*

Crabbe and Goyle laughed oafishly beside her.

Their blubbering laughter echoed around the classroom, as several other Slytherins and Hufflepuffs alike joined in.

Dazai rolled his eyes.

Then, to Dazai’s distinct surprise, McGonagall whirled on the rest of the class.

“Mind your own work, students!”

Dazai blinked. He snapped up fully straight.

Did McGonagall... just rise to my defense?

Well. He supposed she might do something like that. Although Dazai had held the impression she didn’t like him much before now...

McGonagall’s shout was in no way gentle. And immediately, the other students jumped and hastily shot back to their own projects. Dazai had half-a-mind to do so himself. Except he was really committing to the *‘villainous slacker’* character.

As per Mori's orders.

Well...

...More-or-less.

Everyone very quickly had gone back to their work. Except when Dazai was turning back to McGonagall's standing shadow, his eyes sudden snagged on—

Pansy—who's eyes lingered on Dazai's. Louring.

Something dark swirled in her eyes—expressive, but unreadable. A storm cloud. A hurricane.

Dazai's gaze narrowed on her.

He had seen Pansy angry before, and this wasn't it. It was... something else. For all the Loyalty Club had tugged at her patience, the events at Malfoy Manor had evidently yanked her a step too far. It felt distinctly dangerous in the way that Dazai had seen in some of Port Mafia's more unfortunate victims.

When a dog is backed into a wall, it has no other options but to bow its head in defeat, or start biting.

This felt like a *start biting* sort of situation.

Dazai itched to mitigate the oncoming disaster—because no one wore that kind of look without intending something nasty. He wanted to control things the way he had in the past. Like clever words in interrogations, or targeted snipes in near fights.

Only...

That went against orders, didn't it?

Unbidden, Mori's words were echoing in his skull again. Rattling around where it wasn't wanted, but was probably needed.

"Keep them around, then," the memory of Mori's voice reminded him.

Roughly translated to: *let Pansy run amok against you. Just don't let her kill you.*

Stupidest addition to an order Dazai had ever heard. *Don't die...*

Regardless.

Rather than attempt to mitigate anything—or even just leave her alone outright—Dazai wiggled his fingers at her teasingly.

Pansy's face twisted uncomfortably. Her lip curled, then she abruptly looked away with a scowl.

At once, Crabbe and Goyle started mumbling at her. She only gave clipped answers in response. It was hard to make out their exact words from here, but Dazai got the gist from the occasional glares they shot his way. He just barely made out his own name grumbled under Crabbe's breath, and *"Snape"* passing under Goyle's.

Dazai's eyes narrowed.

When he turned back to McGonagall, she was watching him oddly.

"About that essay," Dazai said, speaking largely with the intent of shutting everyone else up, "I can't write it. It's... my eye! I can't see properly without the other one. *Terrible, terrible..."*

McGonagall looked distinctly that she didn't believe him, but *also* like she couldn't bring herself to argue with him. She eyed his bandage and bit her lip. Dazai was a brat—and quite obviously lying. But McGonagall couldn't exactly call him on it without sounding terribly insensitive, Dazai reasoned. For all she could be severe, McGonagall wasn't at all a cruel person.

Dazai should know. Cruelty ran in his blood.

To further prove his lie, Dazai squinted up at her.

McGonagall sighed. Again, her arms folded over her chest, looking stern. "I want that in writing."

Dazai tilted his head in question. Beside him, Blaise also frowned curiously.

"Madam Pomfrey is meant to be returning to Hogwarts today. Give her a few hours to settle in, then have that looked at," McGonagall told him.

Dazai audibly groaned at the reminder of his oncoming check-up. But he did perk up at the mention of the matron. She was finally returning today? He hadn't heard back from Mori yet, and was still running mostly blind in regards to that situation. But none of the staff—nor Mori, for that matter—seemed in any particular haste. So for the meantime, he was only watching the situation carefully.

Seeing Pomfrey today would give him a better grasp on the situation.

Maybe I can needle some more bandages out of her, while I'm at it, Dazai thought distractedly. Unable to stock up before returning to campus... *I'll run out, at this rate.*

McGonagall, unknowing to his internal scheming, was still speaking.

"She'll write you a note, if your injury requires you to be excused from work. Otherwise—"

"But essays are so boring!"

"—do your assignments," McGonagall finished, evidently deciding to ignore Dazai's protests altogether. She stared at him for another long second—this time with a severe expression that threatened detentions unblinkingly. Dazai opted not to tell her that detentions meant

genuinely nothing to him. If Snape hadn't told her already... well. She'd figure it out sometime.

"And for the love of Merlin," she breathed, "stay out of trouble."

"Always," Dazai mocked saluted, and she let out a sigh that seemed never to end.

But after that moment, she nodded. Apparently, McGonagall was done scolding him now.

Then, she turned to the remainder of the class—save for Blaise, who she'd been side-eyeing while lecturing at Dazai.

The other students were trying to shoot them subvert glances to no avail. McGonagall and Dazai both caught several of their peeping eyes.

"Class," she said, louder now, "that will be all for today. I hope you all put more effort into spellcasting than you did into eavesdropping. The Softening Charm will be on next week's exam."

Several students squeaked in alarm.

Dazai laughed at them loudly, earning about a dozen glares in response.

McGonagall eyed him—eyed Blaise and him both—only for another second before inclining her chin. "Don't be late to your next class, boys."

Not needing to be told twice, Dazai got to his feet. Blaise was only a second behind him. They waited the few seconds it took for everyone else to vacate before leaving themselves. It was only a little reluctantly that Dazai had to leave his new pillow behind.

Again: the school was strangely barren now.

By the time Dazai and Blaise got to the hall—maybe a few seconds after the others—only perhaps ten students were around. Compared to the usual hustle-and-bustle of Hogwarts...

"At least I'm not bumping into anyone," Dazai mused idly.

Blaise, whose eyes had similarly been scanning the hall, blandly commented, "It is easier to get around."

Dazai swung his arms out to prove the point. His coat and cloak swayed energetically around him. Several people around them jumped at the sudden movement. Dazai didn't apologize and instead turned to say something to Blaise. But before he could—

"Is it true?"

Blaise and Dazai swung around as one.

Two of the Hufflepuff girls from their class were staring at them.

Well, one of them—a sharp-looking girl name Leanne, Dazai thought—was looking at him. Her arms were folded into her stomach like she might be sick, but there was a determined set to her eyes.

"Is the rumor true? The one about..." Leanne gestured in a way that was clearly intented to convey meaning, but decidedly meant nothing at all. "Y'know."

The ratty-haired girl beside her only looked ill, with none of the corresponding determination.

“What?” Dazai asked. He squared his shoulders, and Mori’s coat made him a foreboding silhouette. "If you have a problem with me, just kill me already. All this nonsense will just wear me out otherwise."

“Leanne! You can’t just talk to the Demon!”

“S-sure I can, Megan!” Leanne attempted in vain to square her shoulders, too. But she only succeeded in shivering a little.

Blaise took a step forward, until he was standing between Dazai and their new friends. “What can we help you with? If it’s regarding anyone’s being a demon, you can go away now.”

Dazai snorted.

The girls blinked several times, stupefied.

Leanne shook her head. “No! Well, maybe a little.”

“Then goodbye.”

She gawped, looking a little too much like a goldfish for Dazai not to say so. Leanne whirled on him, red-faced. But she only looked more like a fish now, and Dazai couldn’t exactly not tell her that, too.

Leanne sputtered.

“I told you we can’t talk to him!” Megan half-scolded half-pleaded. She had grabbed onto Leanne's scarf at some point, and was uselessly attempting to tug her friend back the way they’d come.

“He’s just—” Leanne started, then seemed to realize there was no point. “He can’t *do* anything. There’s people around! And—and so few students, everyone will have to know it’s him, if he did!”

While they argued, Blaise suddenly nudged Dazai’s side. Dazai glanced at him and raised a brow, as if to ask, *‘can you believe these two?’*

To which Blaise’s blank expression either answered, *‘the audacity!’* or *‘do you want to get out here?’* or maybe even, *‘if you did want to hurt these two losers, I'd totally have your back!”*

Dazai settled on any one of those potential replies. He shrugged.

Blaise hummed. The sound seemed to recapture the Hufflepuffs' attentions, because they spun back to face him very abruptly.

"We'll be leaving," Blaise told them. "If you really need to speak with Dazai..." He trailed off, apparently unsure of the answer. Or otherwise unwilling to give one.

Dazai filled in for him, chipper, "schedule an appointment with my Bookkeeper!"

They shot him matching, bewildered looks. "Your what?"

Dazai flapped his coat at them—a movement which had Blaise sighing, catching a sleeve with one hand, then summarily pulling Dazai in the direction they'd initially been leaving towards. Megan, who'd been doing the same thing with Leanne, sighed audibly.

"Eh? Kidnapping?"

Blaise dropped Dazai's sleeve once they were turned around the hall. Leanne and Megan were out of sight, and Dazai looked over his shoulder a little reluctantly.

Once they were walking for another few seconds, Dazai commented, "...just us now." Blaise made a sound of agreement. "Though I might have liked to know whatever gossip they wanted to ask about... I guess it's fine like this, too. But I didn't think Blaise would just drag me away. You know I like gossip!"

Although...

Did it even *matter*, to keep track of gossip? Rumors? With Mori's plan in full swing, and the petrifications already taken care of, Dazai was finding little purpose in it. Aside from the general rush it gave him, to be in-the-know. Specifically when said gossip involved him! But it was kind of pointless now. Wasn't it? Mori's schemes hardly cared what people were saying about him now. So long as it was bad, things were fine. Good, even.

...Dazai supposed.

He glanced out the corridor window. At the drop to the breezeway below.

It was quiet for a moment while they walked. The halls were significantly more empty now, what with their dawdling.

Eventually, Blaise filled in the silence. "People like those two are..." He considered. Then finally decided on, "...annoying."

"Really?" Dazai asked. "I mean, of course they are. But I thought you'd say they were *boring*, or something else passive like that."

Blaise shrugged. "I've been feeling annoyed, lately."

"Wah, you're like a whole new person now! With feelings and everything! How come?"

“When people say bad things about you,” he said wisely, “or me. Or any of my friends,” here, his eyes pointed significantly at Dazai. Though the mafioso wasn’t sure why. “I get annoyed.”

Dazai blinked. Then, when Blaise’s words fully registered, he made a face like they’d stepped in something unpleasant and squelching. “Blaise is sentimental.”

Blaise raised his hands, pacifying. “I’m afraid so,” he said, not at all as mournfully as Dazai thought he should have.

He looked away, suddenly and strangely finding that it felt like his insides were squirming.

Blaise paid his lapse no mind, and asked instead, “is your eye actually bothering you?”

Dazai turned a cheeky grin onto him. “Will you do my essays for me if I say yes?”

“So that’s a no, then. Good.”

“So mean to me, Blaise!” In truth, Blaise’s assessment wasn’t completely wrong. His eye still hurt—ached like nothing else. And the bandages still came away gunky every morning. But it definitely wasn’t stopping him from writing essays any time soon. Still. It made for a good excuse. Dazai wasn’t sure how much of this Blaise was really aware of, though. And only knew that McGonagall at least suspected.

“Forget about that!” Dazai said. He threw his arms out again, indicating the hall, the students, the campus. “Leanne was right! It’s a bit more difficult to sneak around when you don’t have crowds to blend into...”

Though, with the Demon Student title, he’d already been standing out plenty. Still... this was a little annoying. Definitely put some kind of damper on him.

Dazai greatly missed the good-old days. When he was just some nobody wandering the halls.

“What sort of sneaking are you doing?” Blaise asked. He turned a frowning look onto Dazai, and lowered his voice. “The business with Lucius...”

“Oh. All taken care of. I meant about other things. I want to do something fun! Mori’s been keeping me too busy with *work, work, work.”*

Blaise’s eyes lidded, thoughtful. “And this ‘fun’ involves sneaking around.”

“Well, probably. If we follow too many rules, I'll go brain-dead for sure.”

“Somehow, I’m glad Draco isn’t here to hear you say that.”

Dazai laughed. “You think he’d scold me?”

Blaise smiled smally. His eyes wandered the halls, but there was no sign of Draco, Pansy, or any of their other associates. Just a few other Slytherins Dazai didn’t care to know and a Ravenclaw Dazai had stolen a quill from once. “I think you’d put him on high-alert.”

“Draco’s always a little on edge.” Especially lately, with his father’s involvement in Hogwarts affairs. He threw out his arms again, melodramatic. *“Bah!* What a shame, though! I already told him I’m going to investigate a *certain-something.* Draco didn’t scold me so much though... you think he’s lying in wait?”

Blaise hummed. He tilted his chin back as they passed through the courtyard, as if soaking up the sun. A flower.

Beside him, Dazai burrowed deeper into his coat.

“I think,” Blaise told the sun, “Sneaking around. Bickering. Things are finally getting back to normal around here.”

-

“Mr. Dazai, your potion—!”

Just seconds before the boiling, hissing brew exploded, Severus vanished it with a frantic wave of his wand.

Dazai eyed the empty space as though it had betrayed him. “Sir,” he whined, “what was that for? I was nearly finished!”

“Finished exploding yourself?”

“Exactly!”

Severus, along with the other students present, stared at him like he’d suddenly grown a second head.

Not understanding Dazai’s excitement, Severus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Dazai let out a weary breath. He stared forlornly at where the potion used to be. "...I was really going to drink it this time, you know."

“That is hardly conducive to a passing grade,” Severus reminded him none-too-gently. A few students snickered, which Severus ignored. He strode forward until he was only in front of Dazai—and by extension, Blaise. Those two stuck together like glue. “I had hoped your recent interest in potion making might mitigate some of your... antics. Problem Child.”

“Well, this was intentional,” Dazai said, indicating where his cauldron used to be.

“You’re impossible,” Severus groaned. The comment was mostly for himself, but judging from how Dazai perked up, the Problem Child had heard as well. And was, for some inane reason, pleased with this assessment. A wave of his wand summoned another cauldron. This one was clean and un-exploded. “Start again.”

Dazai nodded.

Then waited.

Then—

“Hey, Snape. Why aren’t you leaving?”

Severus lifted a brow and folded his arms over his chest. An unflinching rock pillar. *“Professor,”* he reminded. Then, “I’m supervising.” He eyed the boy and his potion pointedly. “Get started; there’s still plenty of time during lecture for you to try again. And don’t think you won’t be cleaning out your cauldron during detention later.”

Dazai stuck his tongue out. “You’re absolutely no fun,” he groused.

Severus stared at him impatiently until Dazai finally huffed and grabbed the stack of recently-cut Bursting Mushrooms off the desk, which Blaise had politely cut for him several minutes prior.

He lopped them in the brew haphazardly.

“Carefully,” Severus stressed.

“I can’t help it. My eye makes it so hard to tell.”

“To tell *what?”* Severus glowered, though he couldn’t fight the strum of *worry, concern, anger* upon being reminded of what had happened. Of what he’d allowed to happen.

He shook himself. He couldn't afford to dwell on that. Not right now. Besides, he’d already filled Minerva in on what he’d learned over break. Now it was just a matter of catching Poppy up. Then...

Well. Poppy would have an idea, surely. As the matron, Severus had to assume she had some resources they could reach out to. Specialists for abused children. Legal resources for having a child removed from their home. Granted, Poppy hadn’t suggested anything specific before now, so perhaps that was just wishful thinking.

Either way, they had started this investigation together, and would finish it as such.

“Regardless, you seemed to play cards just fine the other day with it,” Severus commented with a lifted brow. His outward expression belied nothing of his current plans.

Dazai swirled the potion around with a long, wooden spoon. Severus noted with some bewilderment that most of its length seemed to have been eaten off by acid, at some point. Now, however, the spoon merely turned its potion peaceably. No hissing. No spitting. No corrosive *anything*. Dazai stirred it until it turned blue, though he didn’t seem particularly to be watching what he was doing.

Severus, naturally, was watching him like a hawk.

However, the other students seemed to have different ideas.

"Um. Sir?"

Severus didn't take his eyes off of Dazai, but he did respond, "Is your potion exploding?"

"...No. But—"

"Then I'm too busy mitigating disaster to entertain you right now, Mr. Finnigan."

Dazai sniffed a vial of salamander's blood and made a face. He then promptly turned to Blaise and asked the other boy to sniff as well.

"It's just that," Mr. Seamus Finnigan continued, emboldened by *Merlin knew what.* "Well. There's a rumor."

"There are always rumors," Severus told him dryly.

Someone cleared their throat nervously.

Blaise flicked Dazai's arm away without smelling the blood. Good for him.

"Yes, but these rumors are about you, Sir."

Severus' eyes flicked to Finnigan's without his permission. Only to find quite immediately that the rest of the class was watching him as well.

More often than not, students did not come to him with irrelevant questions. Severus gave off the aura of someone who might flunk you for looking at him wrong. Actually, he *had* done that before. But Finnigan was bold. Or this piece of gossip was too good not to bother him with. Severus felt the headache coming on already.

He shot a hasty glance back to Dazai to find the potion... coming along surprising well, actually. Then turned back to Finnigan.

"Need I remind you, Mr. Finnigan, that you are to keep your discussions limited to potions-relevant topics, lest you receive a detention?"

Finnigan paled.

It was at this point that Dazai evidently decided that he'd had enough of quietly working, and was going to be a menace instead. He piped up cheerily.

"Aw, come on, Snape! Now I'm curious. Let's hear the gossip!"

Severus whirled on Dazai. The brat was leaned over his cauldron carelessly, expression saccharine.

"Be quiet. At least finish your Fire Protection Potion before causing trouble."

Dazai tilted his head. He gave Severus a smile that seemed to say, *'who, me?'* Ever the picture of innocence, this one. Then, ludicrously, he said, "I've already finished it."

Severus blinked. Once, then twice.

Panic nipped at him, expecting to see another atrocious, half-toxic mess in the boy's cauldron.

Bubbling, bursting, boiling!

He snapped to attention, only to find—

An actually completed potion?

And done properly at that?!

Severus' head whipped back to Dazai so fast that something in his neck popped.

Dazai was still smiling pleasantly at him. There was an unmistakably smug glint in his eye.

Beside him, Blaise looked torn between amusement and exasperation. "I suppose potions really do catch your interest now, Dazai?"

"They do!" Dazai bounced back on his heels. He tapped the rim of the caldron with one hand, showy, and tucked away his wand with the other. "I'm almost having fun."

Upon spotting the wand, Severus realized, "you completed it yourself?"

As with most potions, the last step was the addition of magic. A spell to lock the ingredients' abilities in place, or to give them the magic they needed to activate. More complex potions utilized dozens of spells to perfect. Sometimes simultaneously—at which point multiple potion makers would work together on a single potion together. But that was OWL level stuff and beyond. The Fire Protection Potion required only the successful casting of the Flame-Freezing Charm.

Word of significance here being *successful.*

Severus leaned into Dazai's face abruptly. He searched for any sign of exhaustion, or dizziness, or nausea with narrowed eyes. He only pulled back when Dazai's nose scrunched up in discomfort at their closeness.

"I feel fine," Dazai said, anticipating Severus' next question easily. "I watched Blaise cast it first, and figured the rest from there."

A cursory glance to Blaise's potion revealed it to be complete as well. And just a shade off of perfect.

Severus swallowed. Sure enough, Dazai didn't seem ill. But the Flame-Freezing Charm had not been one they'd worked on in remedial lessons. And he was certain the other professors hadn't dared instruct Dazai since the year previous. Which meant...

"You figured it out on your own?"

“That’s fine, isn’t it?” Dazai asked, not sounding like he cared one way or the other. But he was still eyeing Severus as though awaiting a proper answer.

“As long as you aren’t sick,” Severus said after a short moment.

Blaise, who was in-between inspecting his own potion and Dazai’s, said, “I walked him through the spell twice, if that means anything, Sir.” He was still staring down into their brews while he spoke, paying the professor no mind. Comparing the two potions, perhaps.

Though there was little difference in the brews save for a slight discoloration. Perfect and near perfect. To say Severus was flabbergasted with this development was an understatement.

He knew Dazai was smart. Knew he picked up spells fast.

But to see him effortlessly excel in Severus’ own field of expertise was a little jarring. More than jarring—unbelievable! This boy showed no talent in the field. Had only picked up an interest a few days ago! And no, it wasn’t an expert level spell. But with Dazai’s lack of studying and his self-destructive magical sensitivity, it may of well have been one.

Merlin’s Beard... Maybe he should have expected this. After all, when was his Problem Child *not* exceeding every expectation? Turning the impossible into possible?

“Twice? It was one-and-a-half times at most!” Dazai protested.

“How could I *half* demonstrate a spell, Dazai? That doesn’t make sense.”

“It does! I stopped paying attention to you partway through.”

Blaise paused. “Regardless of whether you were listening, I cast it twice. Let’s say we’re both right.”

“Huh? Blaise is making things up again.”

Severus rubbed at his eyes. All the bickering—this was why he didn’t like children. The bickering and the gossip. Because once again, the classroom had filled suddenly with murmurs and whispers. *Bickering and gossip.* Two things Severus would rather do without, that children seemed to enjoy in leaps and bounds.

It had been happening all day. In one class, then the next. Naturally, Severus had shut everyone up with a harsh glare and the threat of suspension. After all, rumors had become nastily common ever since the Daily Prophet started their tirade against Dazai. But since Winter Break ended and Second Semester began, something new had sparked up the rumor mills again.

Severus was making a point to stay out of it.

He had bigger things to worry about, anyhow. The abuse case he was going to have to file chief among them.

Severus snapped at his class to return to work, and they did so—albeit reluctantly.

Unfortunately, it was only silent for a second.

"Ah, I guess Snape doesn't care about the rumors either?" Dazai drawled.

Severus turned a piercing stare onto him. "I do make a habit not to involve myself in whatever drivel you children are entertained by, these days."

"Hey, me too! Although... aren't you a little curious?"

Blaise took a spoonful of his potion and stoppered it. He set it down on the tabletop, where Severus would later collect it for grading. "I'm not," he said turning back to them.

"Well, that's because you're Blaise," Dazai said sagely. Then he beamed at Severus. "But Snape here is the type to poke his nose where it doesn't belong."

Severus glowered. "Only where it's needed," he said, thinking about the last time he'd seen Dazai mid-panic attack. Or post having his eye nearly gouged out. Severus tried to project as much with his stare, though Dazai only rolled his eye in response. Brat.

"Don't you need to sate your curiosity?" Dazai quipped. He leaned over his potion to peer around the classroom. Notably, his potion wasn't bottled like Blaise's was. Evidently that was the point at which Dazai had given up the assignment, though Severus supposed he should be pleased the potion at least was completed today. "If I were an professor at Hogwarts, I would use all my authority to needle students out of their secrets!"

Severus shivered at the mental image of Slytherin-Menace Dazai attempting to teach anything.

Wait. Forget that!

"Why am I arguing with you again?" Severus grumbled.

"Because I'm your favorite? How should I know, Sir."

Severus was just about to snap back—something about detention that Dazai would inevitably laugh off—when the words were stolen from his throat.

The door slammed open.

A *bang!* echoed so loudly it shook the stoppered potion on Blaise's desk free. It crashed open the floor a second later. Shattered and splashed across the tile.

Everyone in the room jumped.

The least of which was Dazai, who's eyes briefly flashed with something desperate before freezing over. Shoulders stiff. Defensive and poised. His hand disappeared into his cloak pocket. Reaching for..?

Severus jumped as well.

"Barging in is not tolerated—!" he began.

But the words died in his mouth immediately.

Because standing at the door was a frazzled-looking Poppy.

She looked in one piece, Severus noted with relief. But harried, certainly. Her hair was flown out and frayed in odd places. Like she'd skipped caring for it, or scratched at it agitatedly for some time. She was out of breath. Only adding to the strangeness of Poppy's sudden appearance was that she was wearing muggle clothes. Not her usual matron's fare, but instead a neat-looking woman's suit.

That was what the students saw, at least. But Severus had known Poppy for some years, now. And more than that, had worked closely with her starting last year when Dazai first fell ill. Investigated an abuse allegation with her. Hid things from their direct superior with her.

Severus knew Poppy.

Knew that the wild look in her eyes meant, *we need to talk. Now.*

The whites of her eyes spoke volumes.

"Class is dismissed," Severus announced suddenly. His eyes did not leave Poppy.

What had happened? He knew she didn't find Dazai in Yokohama—he'd found the boy at the Malfoy estate instead. And she didn't look hurt, thank *Merlin*. But everything about her screamed that something had happened. Something big. Severus wracked his brains for what. But only was able to speculate about what Poppy may have learned in Yokohama. That city of secrets.

When no one moved, Severus demanded, "Out. Now."

They hesitated for only a second. But Severus' volume was not to be argued with. Needing not be told further, the class scampered out hastily. A few Gryffindors stumbled when grabbing their books. One neglected to grab their things at all in a rush to leave. A moment later and they were all squeaking past Poppy, who still stood in the entrance. They parted around her.

"Madam Pomfrey," Dazai said, still stood by his potion. Blaise was a burr in his side. "Welcome back."

Because of course. Of *course* Severus' Problem Child and his best friend wouldn't leave when they were told.

Severus didn't have the patience for this now. Not with Poppy looking the way she did. Looking—

At Dazai. With lips thin and eyes stressed. When her eyes landed on Dazai's new bandages, however, horror overtook her expression. Even across the room Severus could see how her body shook with a quivering breath.

Next thing he knew, Poppy was dashing across the room. All of her earlier starkness was gone, and replaced by the overprotective Poppy that inhabited the infirmary after a particularly nasty Quidditch match. She was at Dazai's side in seconds.

Dazai took a jerking step away from her sudden approach. Luckily, Blaise caught him by the shoulders before he could fall head-first into the still-swirling potion.

"Oh dear," she gasped, hands reaching out to cup his face. Dazai squirmed under her hands. But when she didn't let up and it became clear Poppy wasn't backing down, he gave up fighting. Dazai's shoulders remained tense, but his face had gone slack. "What happened? How fresh is this?"

"Apparently," Severus crossed his arms, skepticism obvious, "he was mugged."

"I was! They took all my money, or whatever."

"Or whatever..." Blaise echoed unenthusiastically beside him. Dazai tried to shoot him a glance, but was held firmly in place by Poppy's hands.

She turned his head to-and-fro. Inclined his chin to see the bandages in the light. But Poppy made no move to remove the bindings currently covering his socket. She looked like she wanted to, though.

Severus told her, "I've taken a look at the wound..." he debated how much to say, "...it seems to be healing as well as it can be. Considering."

"I still want to look at it myself," she said after another moment of inspection.

"Of course."

She hummed contemplatively, then slowly dropped her hand from Dazai's chin. The boy wasted no time in stepping away from her. Poppy eyed him apologetically. But there was still something strange and tight in her expression. Meanwhile, despite his obvious discomfort, Dazai's smile was at full capacity. It made their current exchange feel especially jarring.

"Madam Pomfrey is welcome to take a closer look at me right now," Dazai offered. The corners of his eyes crinkled.

Severus blinked in shock. He'd been expecting to have to drag Dazai tooth-and-nail to the infirmary.

Even Blaise looked mildly surprised at Dazai's offer.

It was only Poppy—still wearing that odd, stiff posture as she was—who didn't react outwardly. Severus was immediately reminded of their situation. Poppy bursting in mid-lesson. Her trip to Yokohama.

He answered for her, "Perhaps after dinner, Mr. Dazai. Poppy has only just returned to Hogwarts. She'll need some time to settle in before dealing with all of your nonsense."

Dazai side-eyed him. “But Severus is always pestering me to get looked at!” he whined. “And even though it only bled a little this morning—”

“It was bleeding today?” Poppy asked, jarred.

Dazai nodded avidly.

Poppy paled. “If a cut you got over break is still bleeding—”

“It was really more of a gouging,” Dazai chirped helpfully.

If Poppy was pale before, she was white as bone now.

Severus’ nose scrunched at the gory description. But he could hardly fault it. Even now, after he’d seen to it that Dazai’s wound was clean and as patched up as it could be, the image haunted him. A student’s face, bloody and scarred. A hole where the left eye should have been. Stitches that arched expertly around a stab wound. It curdled something in him, even now. And appeared in his dreams late at night.

“Poppy,” he reminded, “whatever you need to tell me is clearly an emergency. I’m sure Mr. Dazai can wait a few minutes.”

She shook her head. “This is more important,” she said.

Severus wanted to argue—the need to know what had shaken her so terribly practically aching. But also knew, if it were him, he would treat the boy first and pursue investigations later. Hell. He’d *been* in that situation just over Winter Break!

Dazai clapped. Everyone’s eyes snapped to him.

“Great! If that’s the case, I’ll be getting out of my next class, won’t I?”

Blaise sighed. And Severus found himself doing the same.

“Don’t tell me that’s the only reason you want to do this now, Problem Child.”

Dazai grabbed his bookbag from beside the cauldron, then played with the strap distractedly. “I won’t say it, then.”

Severus sneered.

But Dazai didn’t have eyes for Severus’ fuming. Instead, he was back to smiling plainly at Poppy. Smiling in that way of his that always had Severus feeling... deceived. Somehow. That nagging, persistent feeling he’d had for over a year now that Dazai’s smiles were always, unflinchingly, false. Severus found himself wilting because of it. Wondering at just what kind of homelife Dazai had for him to develop such skewed expressions.

Poppy’s returning smile was strained.

“Come along then, Mr. Dazai. Let’s get you looked at, shall we?”

Dazai nodded along. “That’d be great! You know, Snape doesn’t have half the bedside manner you have, Ma’am.”

She tutted—not at all chastising—and lead Dazai out of the room. Dazai spun around to wave a chipper goodbye. When he did so, that strange, new coat of his flared out in a grand arc.

Then, they were gone just like that.

As sudden as Poppy had stormed in, she was gone.

Severus frowned after them. That whole exchange lingered sourly on his tongue, though he couldn’t place why.

“Hm...”

Severus nearly jumped. He held himself back at the last second, and turned a scolding glare onto Blaise. The boy was so unobtrusive, Severus had nearly forgotten he was there!

“Mr. Zabini,” Severus said, eyeing him. Blaise lifted a solitary brow at him, as though *Severus* was the one loitering here. Although... looking at Blaise now gave him an idea. And without any audience, there was no reason to mince his words. “You are good friends with Mr. Dazai, correct?”

"Yes.”

Severus’ mind flashed back to one of his conversations with Minerva earlier that year. She’d reported to him that Dazai and Blaise had once had a very personal talk in the middle of the hall. Admittedly, that story was followed abruptly with the knowledge that they’ walked into the petrification of Collin Creevey. But the point was: if Dazai was open and honest to anyone, it would be Blaise. The two were practically inseparable, most days.

“Does he ever talk about his homelife?” Severus asked, serious.

If Dazai wouldn’t tell him the truth, maybe someone who cared about him would. Because if he was serious about getting Dazai removed from Yokohama (and he was, now more than ever), he would need all the information he could get.

Blaise blinked, briefly looking surprised. But he wiped the expression off his face quick enough that Severus may have only imagined it. His usual stoic frown was back a second later. “You’re concerned about him,” he commented.

“I am,” Severus saw no reason to lie. “Answer the question, boy.”

Blaise tilted his head. Then said, “Not much.”

“He doesn’t talk about it much?” Severus guessed. When Blaise nodded, he grunted. Because of course Dazai was difficult even with his friends. He couldn’t just make this easy for them. Had to make them jump through as many hoops as possible, even when they so clearly wanted to help him.

While he rubbed tiredly at his brow, Blaise was watching him with a considering expression. He wasn't saying a word and had pursed his lips.

Upon realizing Blaise was clearly thinking something, Severus dropped his hand back to his side. He pressured Blaise with a characteristic scowl. "If you know something," he said. And though his tone started off severe, the intensity of their conversation had his voice dropping into something softer by the finish, "you need to tell me. I can help him, but only if I really know what's going on."

Merlin knew he would be laughed out of the office if he told any authorities he thought the *Demon Student* was being abused. *Especially* without any real evidence. And not just that: but Yokohama's strangely closed borders only made the job more difficult. How do you convince two of the most closed-off societies in the world that they need to open up? Without Albus' patronage, the job was only looking even more impossible.

Poppy would know what to do. But she was dealing with something more pressing at the moment. He would have to ask her advice on that particular matter over dinner.

"Does Dazai trust you?"

Severus blinked out of his musings to stare dumbly at Blaise. "I'm his professor. I should hope so."

But that wasn't exactly true, and Severus knew it before the words even left his mouth. *'Trust'* and *'Dazai'* didn't even belong in the same sentence. No matter how much Severus reiterated his intentions. Dazai still wouldn't tell him anything.

"He *likes* you," Blaise told him. "But I don't know if he *trusts* you."

Severus blinked at that. *Dazai actually liked him?* "I am trying to help him, boy. He can feel as betrayed as he wants *after* I've ensured he is safe."

Blaise considered this with a blank frown. His eyes did a funny twitch towards the door, where Dazai and Poppy had vanished several minutes ago. Whatever he was thinking, it was near impossible for Severus to discern. That was something Blaise and Dazai had in common. Unfortunately.

But in the past, Blaise had let himself be hurt to protect Dazai. His still form, lying bloody and prone on the floor of Quirrell's office still reflected in Severus' head now. And he knew that Blaise would make the right decision now, as well.

And sure enough, Blaise eventually said,

"...he's unhappy."

Severus' eyes narrowed.

"At home?"

“Everywhere, I think,” Blaise said. Severus’ mouth dropped open, but Blaise only stared straight ahead. He seemed to be looking through Severus. “But. Yes. Especially at home.”

It shouldn’t come as a shock. Severus knew Dazai was deeply troubled. He’d talked to the boy about self-harm, for goodness’ sake! But somehow, hearing it said so plainly. From an outside perspective. It had Severus’ heart clenching painfully.

“I could tell you all of the things I’ve noticed. The things he’s told me,” Blaise continued. “But Dazai wouldn’t want me to.”

“Tell me.”

“Dazai wouldn’t want me to,” Blaise merely repeated. As if that was all that mattered.

Severus levelled Blaise with a serious stare. When the boy merely lifted a brow at him (insubordinate! Dazai really had the worst influence on these brats), Severus made it a point to bend down so they were at eye-level. A conversation like this, he didn’t want to mince his words. Or mislead his intentions. “If he needs help, you need to tell me. Mr. Dazai may want to keep these things to himself, but it is in his best interest if you tell me what you know.” Then, because Blaise may still be unconvinced through his own loyalty, Severus asked him outright, “Is Dazai being abused?”

Unexpectedly, Blaise actually startled. His brows furrowed, and he blinked several times.

But still, he said nothing.

“Mr. Zabini—”

Blaise’s expression shuttered closed. His pinched brows were now less of bewilderment and more of contemplation. He cut Severus off before he could finish speaking. “I hadn’t thought to use that particular word before... *abuse*,” he said, sounding thoughtful. “Though I suppose...” he trailed off. Blaise took his time to gather his thoughts. Severus reluctantly let him.

A long moment passed between them. Severus was glad he’d sent the other students away early, now. The next class wouldn’t begin for another dozen-or-so minutes. There shouldn’t be any interruptions for this conversation until then. And for all this was giving him a headache, this talk was necessary. If need be, he would cancel next hour’s class as well. No hesitation.

“I know it can feel like betraying a friend to divulge their secrets,” Severus said, as gently as he could manage. This was hardly his forte. And once again, he was wishing Hogwarts had a counsellor. “But sometimes, the secrets we keep—the secrets Dazai keeps are hurting him. And I can't help him until I get confirmation."

“It’s not about that,” Blaise said, frowning like he’d taken offense. “Dazai is my best friend, so he knows that at the end of the day, I’m just going to do whatever I want. I want to keep him safe... So do you. It’s as simple as that, really. Dazai understands.”

Was their relationship really that trusting? Severus couldn't quite imagine a friendship so confident.

Then, evidently having settled on a course of action, Blaise reiterated at length, "He doesn't like talking about his home."

"He does not."

Understatement of the century. A full semester of prodding and all Severus had learned was that Yokohama probably had a high crime-rate, and that Mori was a *slimy bastard who locked his adopted son in dog cages.*

Severus had to take a breath.

"But," Blaise said. "When he does talk about it, he's different."

"Different how?"

Blaise paused again to order his thoughts. He seemed to take several seconds to coordinate everything he said, and would say nothing at all if pushed too suddenly. But Blaise was blunt when he spoke. Not at all like Dazai, who alternated between quick, snappy replies and thought-out counters. Who seemed never to actually answer a question when asked. Brat.

Eventually, Blaise told him, "weighed down. The world is on his shoulders and he doesn't want it to be." He looked dead into Severus' eyes. "His guardian asks him to do things, and Dazai will break his back trying to do it. You can always tell when Dazai's been thinking about home, or corresponding with his guardian, because he'll start talking about killing himself in a way that doesn't sound like it's a joke anymore."

Severus... didn't think he'd ever heard Blaise say so much at one time. But also—

Dread curdled Severus' stomach.

"Has he attempted..?"

He couldn't even bring himself to finish that sentence.

Blaise shook his head. "Not to my knowledge."

Thank the stars.

"And his guardian," Severus said. That had to be Mori. Dazai's *slimy doctor Mori.* "What is it he makes Dazai do?"

Already, he felt like he might be sick. His mind working overtime imagining all the things someone like that could do to their kid. But he had to hear it. Had to know.

"It's complicated."

Severus' brow twitched.

Blaise averted his gaze, and Severus felt a drop of dread leaden his stomach in anticipation.

“If Dazai...” he trailed off. Uncertain. The sudden hesitance again had Severus fearing the worst. “If something bad happened, because of Dazai’s guardian, who would be punished?”

Severus blinked at the question. Then his eyes narrowed in warning. “You have proof Mori hurt Dazai—”

“Not Mori,” Blaise shook his head. “If Dazai did something bad *because* of Mori.”

Severus stared in shock.

This... was *not* where he'd thought this interrogation would be going. He worried his bottom lip, then plowed forward.

“What has Dazai done.”

Blaise paused, again. But he must have heard the growl in Severus’ throat—the hidden threat there. Because when he spoke next, Blaise’s voice was deceptively light. He shook his head once more as if to dispel their conversation.

“...I see. Anyhow—”

“No *‘anyhow.’* Tell me.”

“Anyhow, Dazai is firmly loyal to his guardian. He won’t just leave because you ask him nicely.” Blaise’s eyes fell to the potions beside them. The flames had gone out several minutes ago. The brews were no longer boiling, and had thusly been preserved at their stage of completion. “Perhaps you’ve realized—Dazai considers most of his relationships in terms of give-and-take. Boss-and-subordinate. It’s the same between Mori and him.”

Severus glowered. “What has Dazai done?” he asked again, no less stern. He wracked his mind for all the things Dazai could have done, and came back with a laundry list of complaints made by the Daily Prophet. But surely, even Dazai’s awful guardian couldn’t force his son to do any of those outrageous atrocities.

“Whatever you think is happening to Dazai at home,” Blaise ignored him, “is probably true. If not, you’ve probably underestimated his situation. Honestly,” he sighed. And it was the first show of genuine emotion beside quiet surprise Severus had seen on him all day. Exasperation. It felt ill-fitting to their conversation, but sure enough Blaise wore that look now on his face. “Every time he opens his mouth, I learn something new about him. Have you tried just letting him ramble? He’ll do it over chess if you play badly enough.”

...chess, huh? Severus supposed he shouldn’t be surprised. Dazai was smart—even if he never bothered to show it. Moreover, the boy clearly liked playing annoying games. Severus was no good with it. And certainly nowhere near Minerva’s level of expertise.

Then, Blaise hummed. “I should be getting to class.”

Severus glanced to the clock. “Tell me what you know, Mr. Zabini. I am not here to play games with a student’s well-being on the line.”

Blaise whirled a glare onto him. It was so fierce, even Severus almost flinched back from it. “I’m not playing.” Then, he sighed. And at once, all the ferocious fire in his eyes blew away again. “I’ve no idea why Dazai likes you so much, Sir.”

Severus’ brows raised. “You are a very blunt child,” he commented plainly.

“Sure.”

Blaise turned to Dazai’s potion. Then with practiced ease he bottled Dazai’s assignment up for him. The motions captured Severus’ attention, and held it for several seconds.

Eventually, Severus sighed. He would be getting nothing more from Blaise. But if the boy was to be trusted, then Dazai’s situation was perhaps more complicated than he’d originally thought. This relationship between Dazai and Mori layered by something he still couldn’t understand.

Something that filled Severus with an aching terror.

And a memory. The burnt letter he’d found under Dazai’s bed one year prior flashed in his mind’s eye now.

‘After all I’ve given you, it would be such a bother for you to fail me now.’

‘You won’t be returning home if you don’t do this, understand?’

Give-and-take. Just as Blaise had said. An order from Mori to Dazai... but about what? Dazai had suggested it was in regards to his passing his classes. But based on what Blaise had suggested... Were these lines from Mori meant to indicate more than a simple request from guardian to son? Something bigger? Something worth punishing, as Blaise had worried?

He drew in another breath. “Fine. You are dismissed, Mr. Zabini.”

"Alright,” Blaise nodded. He glanced up from the desk, and set Dazai’s potion down with a nearly inaudible *clink*. “And thank you, Professor.”

Severus lifted a brow.

Blaise held his and Dazai’s potions out. Severus let them drop into his palm, where they sat and slightly warmed his fingers.

“Thank you for looking out for Dazai over Winter Break,” Blaise told him. “He won’t tell you himself, but he’ll have appreciated it. At least a little.”

Then, absurdly, Blaise said, “Since I’m Dazai’s Second, I can speak on his behalf. So you’re welcome to count that as a genuine gratitude.”

…

Oh, Merlin. Did Severus even want to know what that meant?

-

When Poppy finally finished looking Dazai's eye over, it was well into dinnertime. She'd stayed behind in the infirmary to see about procuring some medicinal ointment for his eye, leaving Dazai to figure the navigation by himself. He figured he would walk in a straight line and at some point find his way. Otherwise, Blaise would find him eventually.

Alone in the halls, Dazai scowled while he walked.

This was not how he liked to conduct business. Because there was certainly business to conduct—only he didn't know what it was.

All through inspecting his eye—recleaning it, checking the stictches, poking at the bruises—Poppy had been. Tense. Watching him with careful eyes. And the taint of Yokohama still seemed to hang over her.

What Dazai knew was this: Poppy had been to Yokohama to find him, while he was busy at the Malfoy Estate. She returns several days late into Second Semester, desperate to tell Snape *something*.

Bad news all around, Dazai thought.

So he'd put on a little charm, and postponed whatever information-trade she had planned. Gotten his eye checked, even though the whole affair had Dazai struggling to keep his mind on the right place and time *(not in Mori's lab, not in Mori's lab, not in Mori's lab!)*.

And while Poppy hadn't mentioned anything about Yokohama during their check-up, neither had Dazai. He was too warry of mentioning something she didn't know about, or spilling some can of worms she hadn't cottoned onto yet. And anything more permanent to silence her... would lead straight back to Dazai. Severus and Blaise both would know it was him.

So.

Tense, awkward silence it was.

Dazai cursed under his breath. He couldn't believe he was about to say this, but, *"a response would be really nice right about now, Mori,"* he grumbled.

Mori didn't suddenly see fit to grace Dazai with his presence. But another few seconds of walking later, and the entryway to the Great Hall did. At the very least, Dazai wouldn't be missing dinner today.

He braced both gloved palms against the door and shoved. It was a hefty push to open. Unfortunately, it was also quite loud and creaking. Immediately upon opening the doors, everyone in the Great Hall turned to look at him. Center of attention as always! Dazai grinned toothily at them, and they all looked away.

All except for a familiar group sitting around the end of the Gryffindor table, that was.

“Dazai!” Fred called, arms waving energetically over his head. George did the same, calling, “over here!”

Dazai cast a quick glance to the Slytherin table. It was mostly empty, so Draco and Blaise were easy to find. Pansy was sitting several seats away from them and forlornly tearing at a cut of lamb.

Blaise, evidently sensing Dazai’s eyes on him, glanced up from his conversation with Draco. He raised a hand and smiled.

Dazai waved back, then inclined his head towards the Gryffindor table. *‘Sit over here today?’* the gesture asked.

Blaise paused. He said something to Draco, then turned back to Dazai to shrug. He made no move to get up.

...Guess not, then.

Dazai tried not to feel too sour about it.

Regardless, he walked to the Gryffindor table. He wasn’t half-way to sitting when the twins each grabbed a shoulder and rather forcibly sat him down between them. Ron and Hermione both shot him an apologetic look. But the twins were practically shaking with excitement over something, and weren’t perturbed even when Dazai protested with a curse.

But before the twins could spit out what was exciting them so much, another Gryffindor suddenly cut in, “hey! He can’t sit here!”

“Yeah! He’s a snake! Not to mention a demon! And you know what they’re saying now about him and Professor Snape—”

“Oh, bugger off, Kenneth,” Fred swatted the air. “Half the students are gone, anyhow!”

George nodded emphatically. “He’s hardly taken someone’s spot!”

Kenneth squared his shoulders, ready for a fight. But before he could say anymore, someone else interjected.

Everyone turned to the end of the table, where Percy Weasley was scowling over a bowl of steaming soup. Beside him, Ginny and Luna were watching their conversation with interest. Evidently, Dazai wasn’t the only person sitting out-of-place today.

“It’s fine, Mr. Towler. Mr. Dazai can sit here if he’d like.”

Kenneth gawped and spat.

“Oh! Point to Perc for best big brother!”

Though Fred and George looked ecstatic, Ron was staring at Percy like his brother had suddenly grown a second head. “Percy? Breaking the rules? I don’t believe it!”

Percy flushed a brilliant shade of red. “There’s no rule against him sitting here. As long as he doesn’t start any fights.”

Dazai raised his hand in mock salute, and Percy smiled at him in a way that was not at all reassured.

“But it’s—he’s—”

“—fine,” Percy concluded. Kenneth’s mouth snapped shut. And several other Gryffindors, who had been preparing to say their piece as well, did the same. “Back to dinner now, everyone. I won’t tolerate anyone who starts a ruckus.”

Dazai blinked. That was the second time now Percy had come to his defense. He was mentally reconsidering all of their previous interactions for a clue as to why, when Fred and George apparently could no longer hold in their excitement.

He turned to them when their bouncing in place became too obnoxious to ignore.

“Dazai!”

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell us!”

Dazai squinted at them. He ignored the plate of lamb that was being shoved in front of him and pushed it aside to set his bag down instead. He was sure he didn’t know what these two were on about. They’d spoken every day since Dazai’s return to Hogwarts. And since then, Dazai had done nothing but loiter around the office with Riddle, or bully Blaise into games of chess.

“...tell you what?”

Dazai had secrets, sure. Plenty of them. But the only one currently at risk was...

His eyes flicked to the staff table expectantly. Poppy wasn’t there. Yet.

And there was no way anyone else had reason to suspect Yokohama for what it really was.

“About Snape!” Fred and George said simultaneously.

Dazai blinked. He looked to Snape, but the man was only frowning into his soup. Lockhart was making some grand show beside him that apparently could not be escaped. He lifted a brow at the twins. “About Snape *what?”*

But, hold on! Was this about what everyone had been whispering about all day? *Something, something, Snape and Dazai*—that’s right! After Transfiguration, then again in Potions. And again, just now! There was some new rumor everyone was just dying to ask him about.

Usually, if he didn't find out the rumor immediately, it died out pretty quick. But if even the twins were bringing it up...

Fred and George slammed their hands down.

"Professor Snape is your dad!"

Dazai stared.

"...he's... what?"

"Your dad!" Fred echoed, as George leaned close to his ear to whisper, "Your *dad!* I can't believe we didn't notice sooner. He took you to Diagon Alley first year and everything."

Dazai looked between them, bewildered. "You've gone insane."

Across the table, Hermione let out an exhausted sigh. She ran a hand down her face. "Don't bother Dazai with the rumors, you two! Kids are always spreading around nonsense. Let's not fan the flames."

Ron hastily chewed through the lamb in his mouth. It was a rather grotesque display, but when he loudly swallowed a few seconds later, he at least wasn't speaking with his mouth full. "Not fanning the flames if everyone already believes it, 'Mione."

"He hardly needs more bad press."

"It *is* awful to be related to Snapey," George said.

"I'm not related to him," Dazai countered, audibly baffled. "I know you two know this already."

Fred blew a raspberry and flapped his hand dismissively. "Sure *we* know it."

"But everyone else is bringing up some valid points! So we're jumping on the bandwagon."

"That first time we met, in Diagon Alley," Fred counted off on his fingers. "Then he personally brings you back from Winter Break? Plus the bonus lessons he just *has* to personally teach you himself. And how he lets you get away with so much more nonsense than everyone else! Talking back to him, and stuff."

"I can kind of see a resemblance, too," George said, squinting and turning his head. "A gloomy kind of atmosphere can be genetic, you know. Lately, you've got these bags under your eyes, Snakey. And you know Snape always has that deeply exhausted look to him, too." He gesture vaguley to Dazai's face.

Dazai flicked a piece of lamb at them. It smacked Fred in the face and had him spluttering.

"He's a bleeding heart," Dazai told them, "you just don't needle him enough to see it."

"Hey! I resent that."

“Yeah, we bother him plenty! And only ever get detentions for it.”

Dazai rolled his eye. “Detentions are old news.”

Again, his gaze wandered to the staff table.

Snape was staring at Dumbledore with an expression that was difficult to make out from this distance. Dazai wondered what they were talking about... perhaps Snape was also getting drilled about this new rumor? Or maybe not. Dazai searched for Poppy at the table and didn’t find her. He was finding it difficult to care about some nonsense rumor when Poppy’s secret trip to Yokohama was so much more pressing.

“Dazai?” Hermione asked. Dazai turned back to her. She had followed his gaze to the staff table and was now watching him with a pitiful expression. “It’s only a rumor. I’m sure this will all blow over in no time at all.”

“Blow over? Once the Daily Prophet catches wind, we’ll never hear the end of it!” Ron huffed.

Hermione shot him a truly scathing glare that had Dazai chuckling.

Fred and George shared a look, then frowned. “Sorry. Does it bother you?"

“The rumor?” Dazai asked, and they both nodded. He shrugged. “Should it?”

“Well, I think a lot of people might be uncomfortable.”

“Hence all the buzz about you two being related! Can you imagine? How shocking it would be if we found out someone like Crabbe was actually related to Dumbledore?”

Ron’s nose scrunched up. “The headmaster, related to that brute?”

“That’s an awful thing to call our classmate,” Hermione sniffed. “Though you do have a point.”

Ron grinned triumphantly.

“If it’s about nepotism, the fuss will die down once everyone remembers I’m failing Potions,” Dazai commented, palm tiredly supporting his cheek. Across the room, Lockhart said something boisterous and Snape fisted his cloak to keep from snapping.

“Not nepotism,” Hermione told him. “*Everyone* knows you’re failing out, Dazai.”

Dazai nodded, though his mind was elsewhere.

“It’s the bit about the Demon,” Fred explained. Dazai lifted an eyebrow at him to continue. “People are starting to wonder if he’s a demon too. Or—”

“—maybe not a demon,” George finished, “but definitely more on *your* side than the general public’s. And that’s where the trouble is, see?”

“I heard some Ravenclaws saying they hope he gets fired!” Ron said.

“For associating with Dazai?” Hermione squeaked. “He wouldn’t be... *would he?”*

“Can’t be good for his image, poor sod,” Fred bemoaned. “No offense, Boss.”

Dazai flapped a hand. “None taken. I’m awful company.”

It wasn’t much of a surprise, anyhow. That he might be ruining Snape’s name just by existing in his proximity. Sure enough, Dazai was doing the same with everyone in his gang. He hated to even think it: but Pansy might be the smartest idiot among the lot. The only student insistent on keeping Blaise and Draco away from Dazai’s sullying presence.

The twins made a hurt sound.

“Aw, don’t say that, Snakey! We love hanging out with you!”

Dazai was saved having to respond when a far door suddenly swung open, catching his attention sufficiently. Madam Pomfrey entered through it a second later. She shut the door at her back quietly, and it seemed only Dazai had noticed her entrance. Pomfrey glanced around the Great Hall—apparently taken a quick stock of her surroundings. She couldn’t have missed how barren the tables were. How Second Semester had left them all lacking for company.

Her eyes skipped over the Gryffindor table last. She was half-turned to the staff table when, abruptly, she blinked and whirled back around to stare straight at Dazai. Theirs eyes met across the gap.

It was hard to make out just what sort of expression Pomfrey was wearing. But Dazai didn’t like it.

After a second, a welcoming smile graced her lips. Dazai smiled in return, but felt none of it.

Yokohama clung to her like a plague.

Dazai itched to cleanse her of it. Silence whatever secret she must have learned. Should he have taken the risk? Called Pomfrey on it during their check-up? Now, Pomfrey was walking determinedly towards Snape. Dazai could hardly jump up and stop her now.

Snape greeted Pomfrey with a serious mien. She took the seat beside him, said something far too quiet and far too distant for Dazai to make out, then shook her head.

What would Mori do? Dazai thought.

And Mori’s voice echoed, *‘you’re too sentimental’* and *‘act like a real mafioso’* and *‘my favorite executive.’*

Dazai was still deciding on the most covert course of action he could take to grill Pomfrey about Yokohama without also revealing his hand when the universe decided it had other plans for him.

Or rather, *Mori* had other plans for him.

Because not a second later, a year-old Norwegian Ridgeback crash-landed onto the table.

Dazai's Norwegian Ridgeback.

Gasps and screams pierced about the Great Hall. He heard several people shoot to their feet. A wild dragon had just broke into Hogwarts! About to attack a student!

"A monster!"

"Oh my Stars!"

"Do something!"

Trilling excitedly, Egg proudly dropped a letter in Dazai's lap.

Then she plopped down onto her haunches and preened.

The Great Hall went dead silent.

Dazai unfolded the letter. It seemed as though everyone waited with bated breath for what the letter might reveal. Or what Egg might do next.

'Dazai,'

Mori had written.

'Your professors are becoming a problem. I'll leave the business of Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall up to your personal discretion.'

Egg yawned so big and wide her jaw cracked. She had a million sharp teeth.

'As for Poppy Pomfrey,' Mori said, *'Eliminate her immediately.'*

The tense silence covering the Great Hall snapped. Suddenly, the screaming had exploded ten-fold, and Dazai felt it in his lungs.

'Don't disappoint me, darling.'

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the wait - we should be back to schedule now unless something comes up ! also - decided i don't want comments anymore, so i turned them off. hope it isn't too much of a bother for you all. sorry!

next up: uhhhh

Big Bad

Chapter Summary

Poppy Pomfrey.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Incendio!"

The spell left Dazai's mouth before he could think to do anything else.

Within the second, Mori's letter was no more. Ashes crumbled into a heap in front of Dazai on the table, where Egg sniffed at them eagerly.

Eliminate Poppy Pomfrey.

He heard it in his head. Echoing. In Mori's voice. Then a second time in his own voice.

Kill Poppy Pomfrey.

Dazai stared at the pile of ashes. They'd fallen in a clump, disorderly and dirty. He was lucky not to have been eating, otherwise the meal would have been soiled. Instead, they only dirtied the spot in front of him. A stain.

How do you kill the school matron?

No, correction. How do you kill the school matron without it tracing back to you? Because Dazai was suspect number one for any and everything bad at Hogwarts right now. *Look evil,* he thought, *but not so evil as to get expelled.* What a tall order! No way could he do this halfheartedly. This murder would take care and finesse. If not, at least he Dazai would need to produce some reasonable excuse for Pomfrey's death. He could poison her. That might be the easiest, if the poison could make it look natural.

There was no alternative to this assignment. No wiggling out of this job with some other option that had fewer consequences. Mori had demanded it, and Dazai was his executive. He'd slipped in the past as a mafioso, he knew. But this. This Dazai could do. Had to do.

Dazai could hear his heart in his ears. He... made it stop doing that.

(Pomfrey had been nice to him in the past.

…

Dazai would make her death painless.)

"Quiet!"

All at once, the ring of Mori's voice in his ear was stripped away. Dazai blinked several times, and jerked to face the head of the Great Hall.

Around him, the rest of the student body abruptly ceased their shouting. Dazai had nearly drowned them out with his own turbulent thoughts. But it was like a snapping rubber band—all at once the yelling and screaming was ringing in his ears again painfully. Dazai shot a quick glance to the twins, searching. They were both staring at him, wide-eyed. As was the rest of the gang.

Dazai looked back to Dumbledore.

"Students, I ask that you return to your common rooms immediately," the headmaster was declaring. His voice had a booming quality to it that buzzed in the air. A volume amplification spell? "Your prefects will guide you there safely."

For a second, Dazai was confused. But then, a plume of smoke fogged over his table and he realized.

As far as the staff are concerned, there's a wild beast here!

Of course, that was hardly true. And for all Egg could be a wild little thing, she was exceptionally well-behaved at the moment. Delivering a letter peaceably and...

Delivering a letter. *Egg.*

Mori must have done this on purpose. Drum up more controversy. More fear. By letting the world know Dazai had a powerful dragon under his command. Just another part of Mori's scheme he'd refused to let Dazai in on. Another unwanted curveball. Hysteria.

Dazai's fists clenched in his lap.

There was a moment of hesitation around the room, where no one stood or even seemed to breathe. But then Percy was rising to his feet and saying to his table, "Everyone, with me. Slowly."

The Gryffindor students all looked to one another. Then, in a few stuttering waves, they all stood up with their prefect.

It was lucky they really were all moving so carefully, precisely. Egg didn't startle like she had on the train. Didn't shoot off or spit fire. Instead, she only moved a bit closer to Dazai.

Percy's initiative was apparently all the motivation the other houses needed. A few seconds later, the Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin prefects all stood up to do the same. Across the tables, Dazai caught Gemma and Gabriel shooting him livid and aghast looks respectively.

“You five,” Percy said, tearing Dazai from his observations. He was staring at Dazai’s gang, who as a whole had yet to move away from where Egg was preening between them. Percy had turned a particularly strict stare onto Dazai. “Get up. Now.”

Hell’s Hounds shared a look. But as one, they promptly deferred to Dazai.

Dazai, who’d just been instructed to kill someone.

Right. Back to work.

He bodily shook himself, brushing off the lingering strangeness that had taken residence in his chest ever since reading his new assignment. He turned a brilliant smile onto Fred and George. “You all should leave. I suspect I’m about to be interrogated.”

With the Great Hall mostly empty now—save for some straggling Gryffindors trying to get a peek at Dazai’s dragon (or, more likely, hoping to see Dazai getting expelled on the spot)—the staff had risen to their feet and were very cautiously walking towards the Gryffindor table.

Percy seemed to be intentionally keeping his distance from Egg. He was standing just slightly too far away to grab his siblings by the cloaks and pull them back. But he looked like he wanted to, so Dazai told his gang again, “go ahead. I’ll catch up with you later.”

The twins looked like they wanted to argue.

Ron and Hermione, however, seemed to have no such complaints. They were both on their feet only a few seconds later. Once they were within range, Percy grabbed them both by the arms and shoved them off towards the exit.

“Hey!”

“Shush, Ron! Do you want to get in trouble?!”

The twins paid them no heed.

“Dazai, this is mostly our fault,” George muttered under his breath so only the three of them could hear. He gestured to Egg.

“We stole her. And *we all* hatched her. We’re not about to just let you get in trouble for the whole thing.”

Dazai held the twins’ gaze, serious. “It’s your job to cause mayhem. It’s the boss’ job to take care of the mess,” he told them, “Remember?”

Fred and George looked at him skeptically. Slowly, understanding turned in their eyes. And though they looked deeply reluctant about it, they both acquiesced a second after. Fred and George stood up as one unit.

“We trust you, Boss.”

“Good luck with,” Fred gestured to where the staff were approaching, “all that.”

“I don’t need luck, I have incredible charm and wit.”

George laughed tightly. “Sure. Come find us when you’re done being charming and witty, okay?”

Dazai waved a hand in response, noncommittal.

Evidently at his limit, Percy finally bridged the shortening gap between himself and his brothers. He yanked them both to his side and physically carted them to the door. He sent a final, contemplative glance at Dazai before finally leaving. He shoved several lingering students outside along the way. No eavesdroppers, no casualties.

Yet.

Then, it was only Dazai, Egg, and the entire staff body of Hogwarts.

Purposefully, Dazai kept his posture light and relaxed. He didn’t even turn around when they came up beside him, and merely inclined his head to them instead.

“Mr. Dazai.” Snape was the first to speak. His hands were hovering uselessly in front of him, and there was a press to his brows. “Carefully step away from the dragon.”

Vector let out a bewildered sounding scoff. “Clearly, he’s not going to be attacked by it.”

“I think the dragon is his,” Trelawney said softly into Vector’s side. “It’s fond of him.”

She hummed, contemplative. Then Vector and Trelawney leaned close to one another and whispered quickly back and forth. The ghostly professor Binns, hovering translucent just above them, joined in a second later.

Meanwhile, Dumbledore was standing at the very front of their pack, staring down at Dazai with unreadable eyes. His expression belied nothing of what he was thinking. Dazai didn’t look away from the headmaster for a second. Dumbledore did the same. Their eyes met in a cool stare.

Naturally, it was Lockhart’s booming voice that startled the two of them out of their silent musings.

“Expel the demon!”

“What?” Sprout whirled on him. “What for?”

Flitwick cleared his throat uncomfortably. “He has a *dragon*, Pomona.”

“Aye. Illegal to own a dragon,” Hagrid roughed. But he was too busy making heart-eyes at Egg for the words to sound too severe. “But there adorable. Always wanted one, ya’ know? Never could, with’a regulations, but...”

"Ha! See, Albus! The demon is breaking the law! A just reason to have him expelled! He's even conscripted a monster to aid him in his vile acts!"

"I don't want to hear that from *you*, Gilderoy," Snape growled.

"Hah?! I told you, Severus! I have absolutely no idea what you mean, about Mrs. Norris' petrification! I'm innocent! Innocent!"

"Enough bickering," McGonagall cut in. "There are more important things to discuss at the moment."

Snape's mouth promptly snapped shut.

Lockhart argued, "it's as I've been telling you all for months. The boy is evil! And his bringing some foul monster to Hogwarts only proves it further."

Said *foul monster* was cleaning her paw with a poked-out tongue.

Dazai cleared his throat, deciding now was the best moment to interject—before things got too carried away and people started making assumptions he didn't like.

"You're welcome to kick her off campus, if you can manage it," he told them.

The second Dazai spoke, the Great Hall went quiet. Trelawney, Vector, and Binns ceased their whispering. Lockhart finally shut his mouth. Even Dumbledore, who otherwise seemed unphased, blinked at him with twinkling eyes. Though the headmaster seemed to be less surprised than vaguely amused.

"She tends to follow me around. But if you can make her stay away, that's fine too."

It was silent for a moment.

Dazai wished he could take the yawning seconds to appreciate the bewildered faces everyone was wearing. But unfortunately, Egg—Mori—had put Dazai in a bit of a situation here. He didn't have the luxury of laughing in the staff's faces. There was only just enough room to squeak out of repurcussion.

"She *follows* you?" Snape and Vector asked at the same time.

Dazai glanced to them, but looked back to Dumbledore just as quick. He stood. "For whatever reason," he said.

Snape looked skeptical—as he ever was when Dazai attempted to justify himself.

Lockhart's expression seemed to be caught somewhere in between ecstatic energy, and righteous fury. Though he at present said nothing except to nervously peak around Poppy's shoulder's to stare at Egg. Pomfrey seemed not to be paying Lockhart much mind. She didn't even glance when his hand agitatedly fisted the back of her clothes.

Pomfrey was...

Pomfrey's mein was closed-off.

Dazai didn't like that one bit.

What was going through her head? What revelations about Yokohama, about Dazai himself?

Eliminate Poppy Pomfrey.

Dazai carefully kept his gaze from lingering on her too long. He, again, looked to Dumbeldore instead. The ringleader.

Dumbledore hummed. That strange look in his eyes was impenetrable. "Rubeus."

Hagrid startled. *"Huh?"* He had to forcibly tear his focus off of Egg, whom he'd been steadily inching towards for the past several moments.

When Hagrid jumped, so did half the room. A sudden startle.

At the unexpected surge, Egg reeled back.

And when the dragon moved—!

Within a second, every professor present except Lockhart drew their wands.

Egg hissed and snapped and Hagrid shouted, "Wait! Wait! She's just a harmless li'l thing! Don't fire at her!"

"It's feral!" Flitwick shrilled.

"She's scared!" Hagrid argued.

Dazai looked quickly between them and Egg. A bloodbath of some kind about to break out. He raised his hands placatingly. This did nothing to mollify the staff.

But a moment later, Egg's haunches sunk and her wings stopped flaring.

It was quiet. Several people were breathing hard.

None of the tension left the room. It was only Hagrid, with glimmering eyes, who outwardly reacted.

"She responds to ya?"

He sounded very excited. And perhaps a little jealous.

Dazai shrugged, still watching the wands pointed his way. "Sure."

Well... more or less.

Half-tucked behind him, Egg made a short, trilling noise.

It had Hagrid squealing, and the others eyeing her with more trepidation.

"A dragon doesn't *obey* people," Vector stressed. "It's a wild animal." She didn't turn her focus off of Egg, but her voice did pitch in volume to adress, "Albus. Let us take it down."

"No!" Hagrid shouted.

Despite the obvious tension in the room, Dumbledore maintained that thoughtful demeanor still. It was obvious to Dazai that every one of the staff was waiting for his permission on what to do.

"Rubeus," Dumbledore adressed again. This time, no one rose to uproar and Egg only continued to eye them from her spot at the table. "You are our resident expert on magical creatures. What can you tell us of the dragon's behavior?"

"Wild thing, these dragons," he said, puffing up proudly. "Looks like a Ridgeback to me. Fierce. Venemous, too."

"Fantastic," Snape grumbled under his breath. Then, he took a slow, intentional step towards Dazai. But before he could get close enough to do anything, Egg's eyes sharpened on him. Snape stopped immediately. Instead, he carefully warned, "Mr. Dazai. Get away from it."

"I told you its fine."

No one looked to believe him.

"Well, it's fine if it's me. She might actually kill one of you, so either keep your distance or make peace."

Flitwick pulled a face.

"See!?" Lockhart shouted. He gesticulated wildly, then seemed to recall how jumpy Egg was and huddled behind Pomfrey again. "This beast of his! The Demon must be planning to attack students with it!"

"Quiet," McGonagall told him.

Hagrid cleared his throat. *"Er... "*

Dumbledore inclined his head for Hagrid to continue. Seeing as Hagrid was still all-eyes for Egg, it took several seconds for him to begin speaking once more.

"Done a lot of reading of dragons, ya know? But I'm no expert. They got some of those over at the Ministery, or wherever." He watched Egg. How she sat close to Dazai—unstressed until the yelling had started. Even now, she was warily watching the staff but stayed rooted at Dazai's back. Hagrid said, "Never seen a human and a dragon so close before. I'd almost say..."

At the significant pause, Trelawney and several others turned asking looks onto Hagrid.

Eventually, Sprout asked, "Say what?"

"Ah... they say a dragon might bond with a person they really trust. If I had a dragon—"

"You don't," Snape interjected. He again was whirled onto Dazai. "Are we certain it won't attack him?"

Vector scoffed. Her wand was still aloft, pointed and severe. "Were you always this fussy, Severus?"

She was promtply ignored. Trelawney gave her a light pat on the back. At some point, the divinations professor had set aside her wand. She was now standing rather casually at Vector's side and looking around the room distractedly.

"This bond," Poppy said. It was the first thing Dazai had heard her say in quite awhile, and his eyes snapped automatically to her. "What is it, exactly?"

Hagrid scratched at his beard. It made a scruffy, dandruffy noise. *"Er..."*

"He doesn't know," Snape inferred.

Lockhart perked up. "I do!"

"No, you don't."

"I'm well-travelled! A champion of many countries and continents. Dragons may be especially rare out in this corner of the world, but that's not the case elsewhere. Wild beasts!. I once stared one in the eye, you know."

It was very clear, immediately, that precisely none of the staff beleived this to be true.

Apparently uncaring about the awkward air now settling around them, Dumbledore asked, "Mr. Dazai, where did you find this dragon?"

Dazai eyed him—suspicous of the headmaster before the man even breathed. Talking to people who obviously had ulterior motives was always a hassle. He spent enough time with Mori to know that much. Deciding it was easiest to play the *idiot muggle,* he said merely, "Like I said, Egg just started following me around at some point."

"Egg?"

"Hm?"

Dumbledore's eyes crinkled. Either in amusement or dubiety. "Did you hatch her from an egg?"

Hagrid made a noise. "Only thing more illegal than owning a dragon is hatching one!"

"That's her name," Dazai quickly explained. Though by all accounts, Dumbledore was right. Her name was Egg because her name used to be Eggy because he had, in fact, hatched her

from an Egg. Dazai had no recollection of whereabouts this name stuck. And despite all his fussing about giving pets respectful names, Ron had never made any moves to change it.

"You've named it," Flitwick said, clearly wary of the idea.

"Why *'Egg,'* if you didn't hatch her?" Trelawney suddenly piped up. Her eyes were still dazedly looking around the room, dancing over the ceiling where a charm had been cast to depict the starry sky in motion. Dazai followed her gaze, but refocussed quickly when Lockhart again spoke.

"Egg is a terrible name!" He was squawking. "It won't do at all! No, no. I'll have to change it when I write this chapter... something menacing...*Cerberus? No, no, that won't do..."*

Lockhart continued to mumble to himself for several moments.

Meanwhile Dumbledore only continued to stare at Dazai with that impenetrable look. Eventually, he said, "I see."

No one else seemed to be 'seeing' at all. The staff stared between Egg, Dazai, and Dumbledore with uncertain demeanors.

As for Dazai, he was too on edge with the whole situation. Still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Dumbledore dropped the shoe. "Tell me about the letter."

Damn.

There was no getting out of this one.

Dazai forced a sheepish look onto his face. Made his eyes soften—lose the sharpness they'd gained since reading Mori's letter. His lips pressing thin awkwardly. Another one of those expressions Dazai had once practiced in the mirror, because he rarely felt it in genuine. And when he did, there wasn't often a reason he would want to show it.

"What about it?"

Playing coy would get him nowhere, but Dazai appreciated the few seconds it gave him in stall. Conversation was a kind of waltz.

Dumbledore's eyes glimmered like he knew exactly what Dazai was thinking. "This dragon delivered you a letter, my boy. Seeing as it is now turned to ashes," he didn't gesture or even look to the pile of soot on the table, but everyone's eyes turned to it, regardless, "it must be significant. If you would explain, please."

Without thinking, Dazai instinctively began to scratch at his wrist. Snape jerked straight beside Pomfrey, and seeing this, Dazai's hands fell limp at his side instead. "I'd really rather not," he said.

Egg sniffed and made a sound that meant nothing.

Vector glowered. "Insolent boy. Answer the question."

Dazai raised his hands—the gesture both placating the staff and busying his wandering fingers. "You're such a stickler, Professor."

"Answer," Snape said this time.

Dazai pouted at him. But when he answered, his eyes were on Dumbledore as ever. "It was just a letter from home." He paused, then added, "Mori said something annoying again, and I maybe accidentally lit his letter on fire. *Oops."*

They stared, silenced for a moment by the answer.

It was eventually Snape, pinching the bridge of his nose, who said, "You can't accidentally light something on fire, Problem Child."

"Snape has no faith in me. Why do I put up with you, Sir?"

"Watch it."

McGonagall's face scrunched up. "Impossible."

Lockhart snapped. "I thought he couldn't do magic!" he shouted a little frantically.

Dumbledore inclined his chin. Probably, he was already familiar with Dazai's recent progress with spell-casting. Though he did inquire, "Accidental magic, my boy? Aren't you a little old for such a thing?"

Dazai shrugged. That excuse had worked for him in the past, and people were almost always willing to believe it. "Mori is just so annoying, I can't help it," he said, nodding as though he were imparting some terribly significant wisdom upon them. "Even just imagining his slimy face and I want to cast *incendio*—"

A flame suddenly burst to life on the table.

Ron's forgotten dinner blazed.

Several of the professors jumped—Dazai included among them.

Snape was the quickest to react. He cast *Aqua Eructo,* and a stream of water shot through the air. It smothered Dazai's fire with a *hissss!*

Dazai blinked once. Then he blinked again several times before forcing something cheeky on his face. Because...

Well. Because he really hadn't meant to cast *incendio* just then.

...Genuine accidental magic?

The headache nonexistent, the buzz in the air... well, Dazai could feel that. But it caught him just as off-guard as the fire itself had. He decided to show some of this surprise on his face. That it might make his earlier lie more believable.

While Dazai—again—played up his idiot muggle act, Egg was dejectedly sniffing over the now-damp pile of ashes.

"Like that!" Dazai said, gesturing wildly with one hand. The wide gesture covered up any of his genuine shock as rambuctious energy. "Aren't I terrible?"

The ashes smelt odd, as they were wet.

"You did that on purpose!" Lockhart accused, at the same time Snape snapped, "you aren't terrible."

"...Curious," Dumbledore said.

He said nothing more after that.

The other staff, however, seemed to be anticipating something more from their headmaster. Even Dazai was a little anxious to hear what would come next. His illegal dragon... Dazai was already on thin ice with Hogwarts. Was Egg enough to tip the scales..?

Though she was the center of attention, it seemed Egg was the least invested in their conversation.

Her tail whapped noisily. She was staring pointedly at her claws—splashed wet from Snape's spell. Egg flicked her paw. A splatter of water arced out from it.

Clearly upset, she made a huffy-sounding growl. Her claws clacked against the tabletop.

That was all the warning Egg gave.

She flapped her wings once. Then twice. Egg lifted into the air.

A second later, and a black blur shot somewhere overhead.

The staff all startled.

Most of them still had their wands out, but Egg was even faster than she'd been as a baby. They tried to track her through the air.

Vector fired off a spell that felt to Dazai like burning. It whipped through the air with a screech, only to explode on a far wall.

Egg completely dodged the spell. She dodged one more form Vector and two from McGonagall.

Someone screamed. It sounded like Lockhart.

Egg circled overhead three times. It looked for a second like she might be about to dive-bomb them.

But at the last moment, Egg suddenly vanished.

A secret hole in the ceiling? Or was she fast enough to make it out the staff door?

Nevertheless, Dazai couldn't see—or sense—Egg any longer. She was certainly far enough away to not be any immediate problem for him—though the staff seemed less sure of that. Dazai couldn't help the way his shoulders slumped minutely. Relief.

When Dazai finally looked away from the spot Vector had burnt into the wall, he found Dumbledore's eyes on him. As ever. Quietly assessing. The headmaster always looked as though he were tearing you apart. Looking for your secrets. Thinking. Mori was the same. Though, Mori had his hands in everything. Dazai could barely go a day without the boss' interference. Dumbledore, on the other hand, was more of a looming figure in the distance.

He was looming, now. But Dazai didn't feel so small under him as he had beside Father.

Around them, the staff were splintering out across the room. All wands raised, searching the Great Hall for the loose dragon. Snape, Poppy, and a trailing Lockhart had hurried to the staff table. Snape's wand was pointed towards the rafters, while Poppy searched under the table. Lockhart seemed to bring absolutely nothing to their search party. On the other end of the Hall, Binns was floating beside a searching Flitwick.

And by the other tables, a focused-looking Vector was scanning every inch of the Great Hall. Trelawney was walking with her, but she seemed to have less interest in finding Egg than she did in holding Vector's hand. Meanwhile, Hagrid and Sprout were making calling noises, apparently awaiting some kind of response. None came, predictably. Though Dazai thought if he started making those sounds, Egg would probably come running. McGonagall had taken up her own ruthless search around the perimeter.

All in all, they made for an impressive picture.

Save for Dumbledore, who was continuing still to stare into Dazai.

Dazai stared right back. He smiled—either cheeky or genuine. And Dumbledore returned the gesture—again, either a lie or not.

Egg was long gone, now. Probably back at the office terrorizing poor Featherbrain. But Dazai was still on the hook for Mori's latest power play.

Just what are you thinking? Dazai wondered through bared teeth. To Dumbledore, to Mori, to them both. To Pomfrey.

Pomfrey—he was meant to be keeping an eye on Pomfrey. But more relevantly, Dazai decided,

"I have the worst luck. I must be cursed."

Dumbledore blinked, and when his eyes reopened they were twinkling oddly. "You are not cursed, my boy," he said lightly. "All these strange occurances surrounding you, however, I do wonder how coincidental they truly are."

"Everyone is just out to get me," Dazai said, waving a hand dismissively. "Don't you read the paper, Sir?"

"I certainly do."

When he said nothing more than that, Dazai sniffed.

They stood in silence for another moment.

"About the dragon," Dazai said.

"A most curious thing," Dumbledore spoke before he could continue, "I do wonder how you made her trust you so much."

"...It's my curse."

"You are not cursed, Mr. Dazai."

Sure. Tell that to his rapidly declining mental state and growing laundry-list of unwanted problems.

Dumbledore eyed him for another moment longer—that invisible something flickering behind his eyes. It was quiet in the room, except for the sounds of searching. Hagrid's calling. Heels on tile. Lockhart's running commentary of his own strictly theoretical heroics. Then, Dumbledore declared,

"Very well. Mr. Dazai, you are free to go."

Silence, again.

"What?!"

Lockhart screeched.

"Ah, Gilderoy," Dumbledore said, turning to Lockhart with a pleasant smile. "Seeing as you have some experience with dragons, I trust you've made some promise in finding Egg?"

"Forget that!" he shouted. Several stomping steps had him in Dumbledore's face within a few seconds. "You can't let him go! This is precisely the conclusion I've been looking for! A reason to expell the Demon even you can't excuse!"

"Strictly speaking," Dumbledore said, "Mr. Dazai has violated none of Hogwarts' rules."

"The dragon?" McGonagall asked. By now, she too had returned to Dumbledore's side.

The headmaster hummed. "There is no clause stating a dragon may not take up residency within Hogwarts. Moreover, Mr. Dazai claims the dragon does not belong to him. By that metric, there is no guilty party."

"Th-that's!" Lockhart scrambled. "Semantics! You know as well as I the Demon is up to no good!"

"Hm. Do I?"

Lockhart stared. For once, he was utterly at a loss for words. It was a shame that, given the situation, Dazai couldn't appreciate it at all.

"Search the school," Dumbledore continued, purposefully ignoring the bewildered stares pointed his way—Dazai chief among them. *Just what was he..?* "Find the dragon and capture it."

"Wha—but he's—" Lockhart stop-started.

Dumbledore's eyes crinkled. "It will make a good chapter of your book, no?"

Lockhart's face flushed an impressive shade of red. He stuttered out some kind of agreement before shaking himself frimly.

At once, that awful persona of his was back in place. Charming smile and all. "O-of course! Tracking dangerous beasts is one of my specialties, Albus! Lest this demon have too much influence on it, I'll have the dragon captured by tomorrow!"

"Thank you, Gilderoy," Dumbledore said. He glanced to the other professors. "If you would also look."

Dazai didn't miss the looks passing between them all. Suspicious. Or doubtful, in the least. There was no way Dumbledore hadn't also seen this, but he said nothing on the matter. Clearly Dazai wasn't the only one wondering what exactly was going through Dumbledore's head. His sudden about-face... Dazai had an inkling as to why. He wasn't over fond of the reason.

"Now, if you would," Dumbledore gently prodded.

Sprout shook herself to focus first.

"Er—I'll check the kitchens."

"Right!" Flitwick said. "And I the third floor. Binns—if you would accompany me?"

"Hm? Oh, yes."

"Sybill and I will check near my office."

"S'pose I can look out near the forest. Make a bait for 'er." Hagrid's eyes were again alight. He was obviously enjoying himself. "Raw meat and charcoal..."

Under the stare of their headmaster, most of the staff hurried out to accomplish their tasks. Not *dissimilar*, Dazai thought, to how father's (Mori's, now) subordinates always scampered off after receiving assignments. Dazai watched them go.

Now, only McGonagall, Pomfrey, and Snape remained.

As if by some silent prerogative, they had all decided the order to search did not apply to them.

They stood for a moment. Dumbledore was smiling still. That pleasant look held everyone still. Waiting.

Eventually, he said to Dazai, "It is as I said. You are free to go, my boy. I'm sure you're friends are waiting for you."

Dazai folded his arms. "What a sudden way to end your interrogation," he said, accusatorialy. Dumbledore didn't appear bothered by the attitude and only continued to look at him curiously. "I'm not going to walk by to the dorms only for you to tell me I'm expelled twenty-minutes after, am I?"

"I should hope not," Dumbledore said. Too ambiguous of an answer to do anything other than put Dazai on edge.

"Albus..." Snape said. He took several steps forward until he was at the headmaster's side, then he continued, "The Daily Prophet—"

"—is conversation for my office," Dumbledore interrupted, and Snape's mouth snapped shut with an audible *click*. "For now," he continued plainly, "Mr. Dazai. Please return to you common room. If the dragon returns to you, I would expect you to report it to staff promptly."

Dazai eyed him. Dumbledore didn't blink.

Keep your enemies close.

This thought echoed in Dazai's mind.

Pomfrey was standing behind Snape. She had not stepped closer, and perhaps could sense some kind of *foreboding* in the air. The enemy.

He sighed, sounding very much like an aggrieved child who disliked being ordered around. "You're the boss," Dazai said to Dumbledore. Because as much as Dumbledore wanted Dazai out of the way right now, Dazai too wanted to be gone. He had a job to complete. Grounds to lay. A murder to get away with. Egg was old news. He turned fully to Pomfrey to see some strange emotion twisting her face. "Tomorrow morning, I'll stop by the infirmary."

He pointed one finger to his eye patch. Clean, now. It would be weeping by the morning.

"Ah," Pomfrey blinked. Then she nodded. "Yes. Please."

"Thanks, ma'am."

McGonagall frowned. "Didn't you just look at his eye?"

Pomfrey glanced at her, then smiled thinly. "It's been weeping, in the mornings. I'd really like to keep checking up on it, at least until the healing is a little further along."

McGonagall made a sound of agreement, then Snape did the same.

Pomfrey nodded, evidentally content with this decision. It set Dazai at ease a little. She hadn't objected. And perhaps, if Dazai acted quick enough...

Scheming as he was, Dazai was somewhat startled when Snape asked, "Will you need an escort, Problem Child?"

Dazai blinked out of his musings. "What, to the infirmary?"

"The infirmary." Snape lifted a brow. "The common rooms. Anywhere. Don't get lost."

"You know I never try to get lost, Sir."

"That's what worries me."

McGonagall clicked her tongue and they both turned to her. "I'm sure this once he can find his way."

"As am I," Dumbledore agreed. And though his tone was light as ever, Dazai saw a flciker of impatience in his expression. For just a moment. "We have much to discuss now."

With the headmaster growing impatient and Pomfrey's strange demeanor looming, Dazai decided now was best to excuse himself. He gave a quick—and polite—goodbye to the staff. He was out the Great Room door within a few seconds, and shut it at his back with a too-loud *bang*. Outside the hall was empty. Even the twins hadn't stuck around.

Good.

That was good.

Dazai had work to get done. The pile of ashes in the room behind him was the reminder. Something about him no one could be witness to. Not the demon that lived in Hogwart's newspapers, but the one that lived in Yokohama. Mori's favorite chess piece.

Eliminate—

No.

Kill Poppy Pomfrey.

The plan had already been shaped in Dazai's mind. A mafia executive didn't fail their jobs, and he wouldn't fail this.

No matter what.

Dazai would just have to dirty his hands a little.

-

Severus, Minerva, and Poppy formed a parade behind Albus. It was almost an impressive picture—the staff of Hogwarts following their leader towards whatever trouble lay ahead. A powerful trio. A destination set.

Of course, this was only how they looked on the outside. But the halls were empty—forbiden until the threat was cleared. No one was present to see the tension underlying those three followers. The nervousness. And a pit had formed in the bottom of Severus' stomach that utterly betrayed the sense of strength this group portrayed. His hands kept twitching at his sides, wanting to pinch at the bridge of his nose but unmoving for it. The cloak felt stiff on his back. Beside him, Minerva's face was stern and severe. Poppy had gone quiet several minutes ago and said nothing since except to stare pointedly at the toes of her shoes.

A dragon.

A star's forsaken dragon!

Severus' mind was abuzz with thoughts. Not a one of them did he like.

Eventually, Albus guided them to his office, where the gargoyles waited for a certain password before opening the door. Again, Albus took the lead. Ever the stiff back ahead of them. His posture betrayed nothing.

The very second the door closed behind them, Minerva spoke.

"How did a dragon get on campus?"

Straight to the point. Unfortunately, Severus had no idea.

"The Forbidden Forest?" he hazarded a guess. Sure enough, the word *'forbidden'* had hardly stopped Dazai from going there last year.

Minerva shook her head. "I've had Mr. Weasely following Mr. Dazai. We would know if he went out there."

Albus hummed, and they both turned to look at him. "You trust your prefect's testimony?"

"I do," she said. And though her words were polite, her glare was anything but.

"I mean no offense on the matter, Minerva."

"I know."

An awkward silence lingered for a moment. Severus cleared his throat.

"The dragon could simply have wandered on to campus itself."

"And gotten attachted to Mr. Dazai, of all people?" Minerva's brows furrowed. "What luck. Perhaps the boy is cursed."

"He isn't cursed," Albus and Severus said at the same moment. They shared a brief glance—Albus considering and Severus peeved. After a few moments, Severus conceded his next point and Albus spoke.

"Last year," he began at length, "there was an incident with a fire-breathing creature in the Slytherin dungeons, was there not?"

Severus blinked. he saw Poppy do the same. Then—

Realization crashed over him.

"Shit. He's had it for that long?"

Minerva whirled on him. "That can't be. Surely we—someone—would have noticed."

"One would imagine," Albus said. "And yet, that boy has done many things without our knowledge. His investigation into the Philospher's Stone chief among them."

Severus frowned. That whole situation still left a sour taste in his mouth, and an uncomfortable pull in his stomach. "I didn't get a good look at the monster that day," he said, slowly. "And..."

"Severus?"

"The other day, on the train. Some of the staff mentioned a strange monster loose on board."

"You don't think..?"

Poppy, who had otherwise been silent, suddenly asked, "An attack? Was anyone hurt?"

Severus shrugged. He hadn't heard anything of it. And more importantly, "the dragon is clearly violent, Albus. Are you entirely certain the others can safely capture it?"

For a moment, something like amusement dashed across Albus' expression. In a similarly light manner, he said, "Gilderoy? Most certainly not." Having said that, he was all serious and stone once more. Severus found himself growing more severe in response. "I am not certain. I will reach out to my contacts. Request a dragon expert come to Hogwarts and assess the situation. *Ah.* Perhaps they will have a solution for our basilisk problem as well..."

Hearing that word—basilisk—it was like a solemn air had suddenly settled around the room. A dark miasma that leaden everything around them. Severus' shoulders were at once heavy

and straight. Albus' mien was unchanged. But when he stepped away to face the window, it was impossible to see what expression was on his face. The glass was fogged over—frigid cold outside, but temperate within. Severus couldn't make out his reflection like this.

"Basilisk?" Poppy asked.

"Probably," Minerva began, turning to her, "the thing that petrified Mrs. Norris and Mr. Creevey."

Worry dashed across Poppy's expression. She looked grim, and when Albus next spoke, that feeling only worsened. Severus' eyes narrowed.

"You were not present on campus, when Severus confirmed this theory," he said. The words were spoken slowly. In a manner that could do nothing but put his audience somewhat on edge. Not accusatory, perse, but Severus felt Albus' judgement regardless. "Your sudden leave to Yokohama was fruitful, I hope?"

Severus and Minerva both perked up in interest.

Meanwhile, Poppy...

Poppy's expression didn't change. She was a closed door. The fogged-over window.

"Surely, this is not any more pertinent than the dragon?"

Albus did not turn around to face them, so Severus had to guess at what face he might be making now. But if it was anything like his own—impatience. Albus voiced the thought currently bothering Severus.

"If it is concerning our Mr. Dazai," he said, "information regarding Yokohama is very relevant. Poppy."

Poppy paused, momentarily. Something about her was hesitant, or thoughtful. Again, Severus found his eyes narrowing . Just what had she discovered? Because Severus knew well enough that she hadn't run into Dazai in Yokohama. The boy had been with him. Still...

"Mr. Dazai wasn't in Yokohama when I arrived," she told them. "I'm to assume he was here?"

All three of them nodded in response, and Poppy continued.

"It was as Severus described to me. A pleasant enough city," here, she paused briefly. Then, "Difficult to enter. But an unnoticable charm got me in."

Minerva blinked, startled. "You needed magic to enter?"

Poppy made a face. "Severus, Albus—you must have been expected last year. I wouldn't have been permitted entry without higher approval. Still," she glanced briefly to Severus, "Mr. Dazai wasn't there to meet with, and his father was nowhere to be found, either."

"Hm."

Albus' hum belied nothing of his inner thoughts.

Meanwhile, Severus was beginning to feel a headache coming on. Moreso than the dragon-induced headache from moments prior, if that were possible. Poppy's strange pauses, her subvert glances—the way she had barged into his classroom like she had something she needed to say right then. Severus was certain of it: there was something more going on here. Something she didn't want Albus knowing. This realization rankled, and Severus found himself watching Poppy more closely.

No injuries. Just a tightness to her shoulders that betrayed some partially-hidden stress.

He bit his tongue.

"And the boy's eye?"

Poppy softened at Ablus' question. "Healing. As well as it can be, at least. I'm afraid... it had been completely removed. Muggle surgery, I assume—though you understand that isn't my field of expertise. The eye and his vision can't be recovered. Magic can only do so much, now."

Albus made a noise, apparently no more interested.

But Severus felt that pit in his stomach coil into something meaner. "I didn't use a healing spell," he admitted, like choking glass, "would that have..?"

He couldn't finish the thought.

Poppy blinked. Then, emphatically, she shook her head. "No, no. Unless you'd healed him right after he got it, the damge is just too deep to heal. Even then, *episkey* isn't powerful enough to heal more than cuts and bruises. You'd need to be a full-fledged healer to properly regrow an eye—if that were even possible. And we can't know the extent of the wound before it was enucleated."

Severus sighed.

"Anyhow, with his sensitivity the way it is," she said, "I worry using a healing spell would only stress the wound further."

Minerva scratched her chin thoughtfully. Her eyes flicked to Albus' back. "To be hurt so terribly over break..."

She trailed off, but the meaning was clear.

Dazai isn't safe at home. And*, Albus, what are we going to do about this?* Because the evidence was growing less-and-less refutable by the day. It was only this damnable Demon Student story that kept them from doing anything—Albus' reluctance, and Yokohama's tight lips.

Albus hummed. He glanced over his shoulder, and briefly met Minerva's eyes. "I believe I was clear on that issue over break," he said, succinct. Severus immediately bristled, and the

other two did as well. The absurd cruelty of Albus' response was not lost on any of them. The way Poppy's face twisted into something seething—she felt it most of all.

Poppy was angry.

Severus and Minerva shared a look. That was never good.

"For *Merlin's* sake, Albus," Poppy snarled. Minerva visibly winced at her tone, and Severus found himself doing the same. "The boy needs to be removed from his home. Ask the Ministry to take care of it. Stars know they only listen to you."

Albus blinked. And though the reaction was subdued, it was clear to Severus that the headmaster had not anticipated such a vitriolic response. He eyed her for a moment. The disinterest was visible on his face. Then, he turned back to the window. It was still terribly fogged over, but if Severus squinted he thought he could make out Hagrid's lumbering figure in the snowy distance. "...I understand your concern, Poppy."

"Do you?"

Minerva reached out. She set her hand on Poppy's shoulder, but was shrugged off.

Albus sighed. He sounded deeply aggrieved. Finally, he stepped away from the window. But his focus was only very shortly on his companions. And within a few moments, he had crossed the room to inspect his chess board instead. Severus could still not make heads-nor-tails of how the game was being played. He honestly didn't care. Albus could play those games on his own time. With his own stakes.

"I was under the impression you found no evidence in Yokohama?" Albus asked.

Poppy threw an arm out. "What more do you need, Albus? He's missing a fucking eye!"

Again, a deep, worldly sigh. Albus' fingers skimmed over the board. He didn't touch any of the pieces nor make any attempt to reposition them. Eventually, he wiped some invisible speck of dust from a black tile. Albus did not turn again to face them, and when he spoke it seemed more that he was talking to the mismatched set of pawns than anyone else.

He lamented, "You lack a sense for the bigger picture."

Something snapped in Severus. Familiar and angry and more wound-up now that it had been previously. He couldn't help the scowl now marring his face. Those words. Bigger picture. He hated them more than anything else. And that familiar anger spitting in his gut again reared its head. He took a step forward, at Poppy's side.

"We know Mr. Dazai is innocent of what he's been accused," Severus' lips pulled, making his response sound tight and oily. Albus didn't outwardly react. Neither did his row of pawns. "So there is no *bigger picture* to consider, save for keeping him *safe."*

Finally, Albus turned to face them. He stared blandly at Severus, looking into his eyes and saying nothing for a long moment. Severus felt the sweat catch on the back of his neck. But the boiling-over anger kept him from backing down. Poppy's just-as-fierce stance next to him

helped. Something in the headmaster's eyes—the thing that was always just a little indescribable—unwaveringly fixed on him.

"Unfortunately," Albus said, "you no longer have a say in this, Severus."

All at once, the fight lining Severus' shoulders dropped. Stupefaction took its place. "What?"

Albus eyed him, before letting out a wispy breath. He again turned back to his chess board. When he spoke, it was to the bishop, which he picked up and rolled between two callous fingers. Lifting that particular piece did nothing to make sense of Albus' game. The pieces still in a random order. The black queen still dangerously hugging its edge. Albus said, "Mr. Dazai," he paused, corrected, "The Demon Student is a story out of our hands."

They waited for him to explain. A moment later, he distractedly did. Or perhaps fingering the bishop was helping to focus his thoughts. Severus couldn't imagine how—looking to Minerva revealed only her own narrowed expression.

"Regardless of what actions you want me to take, I must play my pieces more carefully. The Demon Student is—was, the second it hit the Daily Prophet—not a person to our community. It's a symbol." Here, Albus set the bishop down. It *clicked* against the board, and settled in a different square than the one it had started in. An illegal move. Severus didn't understand.

"A symbol?" Minerva pressed.

"Everything that is wrong with the magical community. He's a muggle. A killer. Has no magical potential, but is powerful enough to best our staff. Disrespects our celebrities. Benefits from nepotism. The Daily Prophet knows this, and uses it to stir up righteous fury among the public. After all, curing the root problem in society is daunting. Nigh impossible." Albus edged a pawn to the edge of its square, but didn't push it over. "But Mr. Dazai is only one boy. That, anyone could fix."

Severus stared. At some point, his mouth had dropped open.

"That... that's absurd."

Albus hummed. "Perhaps. And yet, it is the truth. Defeat this Demon Student, and you don't have to confront the truth—that the Death Eaters still lurk among us, that magical prowess and blood-purity are the only factors determining one's worth." Finally, he let off the black pawn. "Hogwarts itself is another one of these symbols—a symbol of strength and hope, to counter Mr. Dazai's evil."

Through the fogged-over window, the sun was mostly set.

"Something of this caliber requires my utmost caution. Expelling the boy now only lets him out of my sight. If I am to control his narrative, I need him here."

A light by the desk automatically lit. It chased off the darkness licking around the edges of the room, but Severus still felt as though he were shrouded in shadows.

Poppy gawped. "So you won't help him."

"To help the boy, or hurt him... no. I haven't yet decided on the best course of action. I will know best, after identifying our third player."

"You—!"

"Hold on," Minerva interrupted, something sharp in her tone. "What do you mean by nepotism? Albus, it's clear as day Mr. Dazai is failing his classes. Not to mention he's a muggle-born without any connections."

Severus paused. He hadn't even realized that. Poppy, too, seemed to be caught off guard enough to calm down. If only momentarily.

Strangely, Albus' eyes again flicked to Severus. Like he was anticipating Severus would answer for him.

He had no idea. "Nepotism?" he asked instead. "Speak plainly."

For a moment, Albus appeared to be genuinely surprised. But a second past and that contemplative look was worn on his face again. So, this was something Severus was expected to already know about? He wracked his brain, but continued to come up short. Minerva had hit the nail on the head: Dazai had no connections in the magical world to benefit from. Lest one count his friendship with Draco. But if those two were to be believed, that familiarity didn't extend to Lucius.

"Severus," Albus said, "you are the boy's father."

...

Silence.

Then,

"What?!"

Severus and Minerva shrilled at the same time. Poppy's mouth dropped open in silent shock.

"I. That's ridiculous. You know I'm not—"

Albus raised a hand. A mute, pacifying gesture that did not calm Severus at all.

"I speak not for myself," he explained, "but for the public. Your favoritism for Mr. Dazai is not lost on the other students, Severus. The events of winter break only strengthened this theory."

The events of winter break... Severus scowled. When he'd brought Dazai back to Hogwarts early—personally. But that was— "I could hardly abandon him after seeing the state of his face," he growled.

"Regardless."

"No *'regardless,'* that's the truth!"

"Then regardless of the truth," Albus eyed him, "the Daily Prophet will surely be reporting on your supposed-nepotism by its next publication. Along with it, Mr. Dazai's dragon. This is one thing I can rather easily solve."

Severus' frown deepened—if that were even possible. He did not like the sound of that. His expression clearly said as much, because Poppy grimaced beside him.

"From here on, you are to cease teaching Mr. Dazai Remedial Magics at once."

Outrage burned in Severus' stomach. "You can't be serious! He needs a teacher!"

Albus hummed. He sounded disinterested. It had Severus' blood boiling. *"Hm.* I was under the impression the boy had progressed significantly? He will rejoin the regular second-year curriculum starting next week."

"Albus..."

"Enough," he concluded. "I've bigger things to manage than the boy's lesson plan."

Severus had to bite his tongue to keep from snapping.

At his side, Poppy did not. Her mouth had opened in a yell, and she'd taken a heavy step forward.

Sensing danger, Minerva quickly slapped a hand onto the matron's shoulder. She shook her head.

No. Not now.

Poppy glare could kill. But she didn't speak her mind, and Severus let out a breath.

Albus Dumbledore was his own kind of symbol. Hero of wizard-kind. And though Severus had of late disagreed strongly with the man, he was still that type of character. He always knew where they were going. What to do next. That bigger picture Severus hated.

Albus was watching them. He couldn't be blind to the near-treason that had just occurred, but he said nothing of it. Instead, his eyes turned to the gilded cage near the window. It was empty of anything save a pile of ashes.

"In the meantime," Albus said after a significant pause, "I would like you to have your prefects watch Mr. Dazai once more. If he can keep a dragon from us, he can keep larger secrets. I want to know everything about the boy there is to know."

Minerva inclined her chin. "Mr. Weasley didn't suspect anything."

"Then he need only look harder, no?"

-

"This is absurd!"

Severus ranted and rallied.

"He *knows* the boy needs supervision!"

Minerva cast him a side-long glance. Poppy, who had her eyes to the floor, barely caught the subtle gesture.

"And Mr. Dazai will *have* supervision," she said, tone oozing discomfort. "Albus has demanded it."

Severus scoffed. *"'Supervision,'"* he mocked. "You mean to say Albus wants him *tailed."*

"Semantics. Mr. Dazai will be fine, Severus."

"I meant his Remedial Magics lessons. His improvement still doesn't match his peers, regardless of what Albus claims. Not to mention he can still fall ill if left unchecked," Severus said.

Minerva hummed.

The trio of Hogwarts professors were the only remaining residents in the main body of the castle. By now, everyone else was retired to their rooms. Even the other staff must have given up their search by now. If the dragon wasn't stumbled upon tonight, surely it wouldn't be found until Albus' dragon expert arrived...

A flicker of lights followed them through each corridor. The crackling flames the only sound aside from the *tap-tap* of heels, and agitated chatter. Poppy had only half-an-ear out for them. The rest of her focus was turned inwards.

As they turned a corner—empty again, no surprise—Minerva said, "You know none of us can defy Albus' orders. He is headmaster, after all."

Severus glowered.

Minerva sighed. "Look. He's still far behind in Transfiguration, right?"

"Hopelessly so."

"I'll pull Mr. Dazai aside and give him some private lessons myself, then. Problem solved."

Severus twitched. "I wasn't *worried."*

"Yes you were," she said. "I'll keep an eye on him. We all will.

They walked in silence for another few moments.

"...You've been quiet, Poppy," Severus eventually said. "Should I ask?"

Poppy finally fished her eyes off the stone-work floor. She'd been walking mechanically—so caught up in her own turbulent thoughts it had hardly occured to her to consider where precisely they were walking. A quick glance around said they were nearest to the Gryffindor common rooms. When she turned to Severus and Minerva, they were both watching her warily. *"Ah..."* she trailed off, biting her lip.

What to do, what to do? Albus was just as imperial as he'd been last time. But looking at Severus and Minerva now... her self-declared *Dazai Protection Club...*

Poppy let out a breath. It had been holed up in her lungs since leaving Yokohama. A ball of sickly energy she couldn't shake. The truth.

The Port Mafia.

They must have been expecting Poppy to yell again, because when she carefully spoke, Minerva and Severus both blinked, surprised.

"I have a plan."

They both sobered quickly.

Minerva collected herself first. "Explain."

Poppy shook her head. "Not here," she said, the words feeling like an imitation of Albus' own just earlier that evening. Her eyes again skipped around the hall.

Minerva, evidently understand Poppy's meaning, said, "my office is nearest."

Poppy agreed immediately, then Severus did as well a moment after. It was only a matter of moments until they reached Minerva's office—this time, their steps focused and fast with an objective key in mind. Poppy herself walked the fastest. All her nervous energy worked itself out in her pace, her breathing.

The Port Mafia.

It kept repeating over-and-over in her head—one of those record-players muggles used to use, but broken. Skipping over bits. But always coming back to that one fact: Dazai is a member of a muggle mafia.

She bit her tongue to keep from shouting up until Minerva finally locked the door at their backs.

"Cast a protection spell, please," she asked.

Again, shock flit across both their faces. Poppy had to pay it no mind—they knew not the gravity of what she had to say next.

"Poppy, everyone is asleep by now, surely."

"Something to keep our conversation from traveling," Poppy's lips thinned. "Trust me."

Minerva and Severus both eyed her for a moment. It wasn't distrust in their gazes, but some cautious emotion lay their nonetheless. Eventually, with pinched brows, Minerva lifted her wand to cast *Invia Obice* around the room. A second later a wall of shimmering blue floated around them. It coated the walls and the door in a thin layer of opaque magic that no person nor sound could pass.

Poppy found her shoulders dropping only slightly upon seeing this. An unshakable tension had filled her about this whole situation.

And seeing Dazai, she had hoped, would settle that ill feeling. Make sense of it all. That she would look at him and just know what to do. That she might see some evil in him, now—hidden just below the surface—and know at once to tell Albus the truth.

She hadn't seen that, of course. No situation was ever so black-and-white. And alll Poppy had seen in Dazai, standing over him in the infirmary white-light, was the same boy she always saw.

Quiet, or loud if he wanted. Hurt. Incredible.

And Poppy really couldn't stomach the thought of expelling him. Because Port Mafia aside... no, Port Maifa *considered*, Dazai was certainly a child in need of help. Her resolve had not been shaken upon learning this fact. It had only been readjusted. A paradigm shift.

But.

A tension, still.

Severus spoke first. "Poppy," he said, "what happened in Yokohama?"

Minerva, following this line of thought, narrowed her eyes and her lips pinched together in a severe line.

Poppy had to suck in a breath. Then another.

"Yokohama," she said, drawing the word out carefully like it were a poison in the air. Perhaps it was. Severus and Minerva both waited with bated breath. "...was not what I expected."

Minerva crossed her arms. "What was it, then?"

Poppy paused. The words she had been desperate to speak for several days now, at once clogging beneath her tongue. Instead, she said, "what I am about to say. It can't leave our circle."

"Poppy," Minerva hedged, "if this is dangerous, Albus—"

"You agreed to co-operate with us, in exchange for some secrecy," Poppy reminded her.

Minerva frowned. Her crossed arms shifted in place, tightening over her chest.

Severus glanced to Minerva, frowning similarly, then said, "That *was* our deal."

Now, Minerva said nothing. Her face continued to twist into a conflicted emotion before finally falling into something serious. Eventually, she said, "...I will make my own judgements."

"Minerva," Severus snapped.

"I will make my own judgements," she stressed once more, "but I will hear out your plan, first. Severus, Poppy—I want Mr. Dazai as safe as you do. But I will not sacrifice my other students for him. This is about him, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," Severus said.

"It is," Poppy said, at length. She waited a moment, until it was clear they both were listening. And though Minerva's arugment had Poppy somewhat on edge... she agreed. Finally, she forced the choking reality out, "Yokohama is run by a mafia—the Port Mafia."

"What?"

"The—a criminal organization?!"

Poppy nodded. She waited a beat for their initial shock to still.

"A muggle criminal organization," she told them, "that's who has the whole city on *lock-down*."

Severus' eyes flickered with realization—no doubt, thinking back to the suspicious letters he'd been recieving from Yokohama. *Stop asking question, or you'll come to regret it,* they'd essentially said. Minerva must have reached the same conclusion. And yet, there was something distinct about Severus' expression that Minerva's lacked.

But he only said, "Mr. Dazai claims to have been mugged."

Poppy made a face. "...it is possible."

"You don't think so."

"I don't know," Poppy equivocated. "This isn't the worst of it."

She bit down the words just before they could escape.

Minerva lifted a brow. She sighed. "Just say it, Poppy."

"Mr. Dazai is a member of the Port Mafia."

Once the words were out, the rest came tumbling after.

"I don't know just how involved he is, but it. It seems like he must be a member. But this Port Mafia owns the entire city! Everyone there knows about it, and they just let it be! I mean muggle violence. Crime."

They stared. Gawping like fish out of water.

Could they breath?

Poppy couldn't.

Eventually, Minerva choked out, "explain."

Poppy's brows pinched, distraught. "There's nothing more the explain, Minerva. Mr. Dazai is... involved with this mafia. A criminal."

"I—he's only a boy!"

"That too," she said.

He paused. After a second of nothing, a shaking hand suddenly rose to pinch at his nose. It seemed like it hurt. Then, gruffly and under his breath, Severus muttered, *"give-and-take..."*

Poppy blinked.

Minreva barely glanced at them, clearly deep in her own thoughts.

"What's that, Severus?"

He made a face, pinching the bridge of his nose tighter. "It's something Mr. Zabini told me earlier. That Dazai considers his relationship in terms of *give-and-take."* He paused. Then, *"Boss-and-subordinate."*

Poppy couldn't help the way she froze. Even already having known about the Port Mafia, this single sentence of Severus' stilled her to the core.

Minerva went tense. "Boss and subordinate—he said it just like that?"

Severus nodded, grim. His lips were so taught as to snap. The emotion warring behind his eyes changed too fast for Poppy to make out. Voice quivering, he said, "we know he's being hurt. Maybe he had no choice but to join this... group."

Poppy had considered that as well.

"Hogwarts, Death Eaters, and now this Port Mafia..."

Poppy and Severus both turned to Minerva, confused at the non-sequitur.

"Minerva? What do you think about all this?"

She glanced at them, briefly, then glared at a point on the floor. At some point, her hand had raised to cover her mouth. "I think," she said, "Albus has been searching for a third-party, and you've just found one."

Poppy and Severus jolted.

"What?"

"It's a *muggle* organization," Severus countered immediately. "No threat to us."

Minerva blew into her palm. "If they can *control* a whole city, they are a threat to anyone. Seeing as Mr. Dazai is here, clearly the whole group knows about magic." Finally, she looked to them. Her eyes settled on Poppy, and stared a pointed hole into her skull. "A whole city knowing about the existence of magic. You know what this means."

Poppy shivered.

The Ministry of Magic existed in part to keep the truth about magic from ever escaping to the muggle world. Poppy knew this—they all did. And what Yokohama must know was a violation on several levels. But what could the Ministry do? Level the whole city?

"Albus has been chasing his ghost player," Minerva was continuing, her voice severe with the weight of what she now knew, "for over a year now. You two know Mr. Dazai best—what is the likelihood he's been recieving orders from this Port Mafia? Stealing the Philosopher's Stone, petrifying the school's inhabitants? You said he works around the structure of boss and subordinate."

Cold dread warped over Poppy.

She saw the same emotion come over Severus.

Because—

The burnt letter, a confirmation.

"After all I've given you, it would be such a bother for you to fail me now," Dazai's adoptive father had written. And, *"You won't be returning home if you don't do this, understand?"*

And though Dazai had claimed this request pertained to his passing grades...

Was that really the case?

If some city-wide mafia conspiracy was at play... could things truly be so simple?

Such a thought, too, had been plauging Poppy's mind ever since her departure from Yokohama.

Severus opened his mouth, but Poppy answered before him.

"Mr. Dazai's letters from home," she cut in, "I've read one of them. There is no concern, there."

Severus blinked.

Minerva also seemed surprised. Her hand dropped. "You have?" She glanced to Severus. "And you, as well?"

Severus stared at Poppy for a brief moment. Eventually, he nodded. "The only concern," he said, "is regarding the abusive nature of Mr. Dazai's home-life."

They all flinched at the word: *abusive*. Severus included, though he'd spoken it aloud of his own volition. The whole situation felt volatile. And Poppy was continuously glad for the wards Minerva had placed on the room.

Minerva sighed. She sounded as exhausted as Poppy felt.

"Then," she said, "we tell Albus the truth about Yokohama." Here, she eyed Poppy. A silent question of, *why didn't you already?* "The Ministry will do what it must, and Mr. Dazai will be removed from his... situation in the process."

Severus grit his teeth. "Is that wise? Mr. Dazai, need I remind you, is the Ministry's enemy. They'll hardly treat him fairly, given the situation."

"I'm afraid I have to agree with Severus. And the Daily Prophet—once they hear about this..."

If the headlines were bad now, Poppy couldn't even imagine them after word of a mafia got out. Minerva's face twisted as she followed Poppy's line of thought.

"I've yet to hear any talk of an actual plan. Albus needs to know. If this is our third party."

Severus grimaced. "Albus is convinced that third party is the Ability Users. This is just a simple muggle organization." He looked to Poppy. "Isn't it?"

Poppy didn't know.

How would they know? If these Special Ability Users could avoid detection, whose to say that now..? Here..?

"Yes," she said. "And Albus *will* know, Minerva. Just. Just not until after I've done everything in my power to save Mr. Dazai, first."

They both perked up.

"This plan of yours," Minerva said carefully, "just what is it?"

"And is it as reckless as your last-minute expedition into Yokohama?" Severus huffed.

Poppy couldn't really say one-way-or-the-other. Her thoughts lately had been... turbulent. Angry. Like if she sat still even one moment longer, she might just explode! The Daily

Prophet's slander, Albus' lack of reliability, those petrifications she was *useless* against—! Poppy'd had enough with it all. And here was her chance. The one thing she could do. As matron. As a human being.

Recklessness didn't fit into the picture, when the alternative had always been doing nothing at all.

And here's the truth:

Going to Yokohama *had* been reckless. And Poppy was still reeling from what she had learned. Seeing Minerva and Severus react with the same level of shock had not helped to settle the tightness in her chest, but it had leveled her resolve.

"I just need time," Poppy told them. Told Minerva in particular. "To get Mr. Dazai removed from his home and somewhere safe. After that, you can tell Albus everything."

"Everything?"

"Poppy... just what are you planning to do? You agreed yourself—the Ministry stands against Mr. Dazai. You may have him taken out of Yokohama, but no wizard family would adopt him. No orphanage welcome him. And Merlin forbid they let a muggle house a wizard child."

Poppy shook her head.

She'd been thinking, for a long time now, just how she could help Dazai. Because Severus was right, and the political landscape made it too difficult to use traditional means. The Ministry would do nothing. Albus neither. No one to take initiative.

So Poppy would take that step.

It wasn't reckless. It wasn't like she hadn't already considered—

"I'll adopt him," Poppy said.

She expected the way Severus and Minerva both stared.

"You'll..."

"Are you sure?" Minerva said, her stare unblinking. "Poppy that's. That's a huge comittment."

Poppy tried for a smile, but it came out tight and tense. But sure, all the same. "I know it sounds strange—"

"It sounds like *you*," Severus said. "But just saying it won't do anything. We both know that by now."

They did. And their previous inaction burned Poppy in the same way she suspected it burned Severus. Still, "I know things seem dire. But... I have a few ideas on how to legally remove Mr. Dazai from Yokohama. The Senior Weasley, Arthur—he works with the Ministry. You

know the Weasley's have a soft spot for Mr. Dazai. It's the wrong department, but perhaps Mr. Weasley could assist..."

She trailed off in thought.

"Poppy," Minerva interrupted. The way her face was scrunched up looked pained. But this was no illness Poppy could cure, so she only paused to allow the professor breath to speak. "You know this Yokohama business is serious. Not telling Albus is tantamount to treason."

"I know," Poppy said. "I'm asking you to trust me. A month. A few months at most. Just until Mr. Dazai is in my care, where I can protect him from whatever fallout Albus brings."

"It isn't *fallout*, Poppy, it's *direct action."*

"Then why must Mr. Dazai be caught in the crossfire?" Poppy pressed. "Minerva, you believe as well as I do—as well as we *all* do," here, Severus' wandering mind sharpened to focus, and he looked between them, pensive, "what's the point in working at Hogwarts if we're just going to abandon a student to the wolves?"

Silence hung in the air for a moment. None of them seemed to be breathing.

Minerva let out a haggard sigh.

She ran a hand down her face, a few strands of impeccably tied-back hair coming loose and dangling around the corners of her eyes. Minerva seemed, at once, terribly old. Poppy felt old, too. Old enough—wise enough—to know what needed to be done.

"Fine," Minerva said finally.

Poppy felt her whole body deflate. Severus did the same beside her, though he said nothing of it.

"One month," she said, "and I tell Albus about the Port Mafia. The *second* Mr. Dazai is removed from Yokohama custody, you tell me."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," Minerva said, the meaning sincere.

"Then," Poppy said. She drew her shoulders up. Exhaustion still weighed on her, but a sense of direction pulled her up all the same. "There's no time to waste. I'll get started right away."

It was late, but if Poppy drafted some latter tonight then they would arrive at the Ministry by the start of the next work-day. No more time wasting. No more complacancy. Severus met her gaze, and she found the same look burning in his eyes, now.

After that, it was only a matter of a few quick words before they were all splitting ways.

Minerva waved them off, staying at her desk to ruminate on what she'd learnt. The truth behind Yokohama—and Dazai's involvement therein. But more likely, Minerva needed a

moment to herself. To contemplate the secrets she would be keeping from Albus.

Yokohama was a threat, but so was Albus. Poppy had held just shy of saying this. She thought Minerva heard the words, anyway.

A moment of contemplative silence, indeed.

"Poppy," Severus said, just before she turned the corner towards the infirmary, "Are you certain about this?"

"Minerva already asked me that, Sev."

"And now *I'm* asking. Adopting a child..."

Poppy smiled thinly. "I told you I was going to put an end to all this nonsense. This is how."

Severus' eyes narrowed in something like contemplation.

Poppy sighed. She patted him on the shoulder, reassuring, though he didn't look mollified in the slightest. "I'll see you in the morning, hopefully with good news on the way. Good night, Severus."

"...good night, Poppy."

The torches overhead lit a path down two corridors, and they split ways.

Poppy stood alone in the hallway for a moment. The adrenaline rush of sharing a heavy burden and committing to such a plan buzzed under her skin. When Poppy blew out a breath, it seemed to lighten her whole body. Content.

She opened the door to the infirmary.

The lights flickered to life above her. Bright white and clean.

Red.

Poppy froze. Her blood ran cold.

She was sprinting across the room before even thinking about it. The door slid shut behind her back—*clunk.*

Poppy reached out to grab—

"Here you are," Dazai said, "you took awhile, Ma'am."

"I—" she stop-started. The breaths that came difficult before now clotted in her throat, her lungs. Poppy moved to grab Dazai's arm where—*where—!*

Dazai shifted away. It was a small movement, almost thoughtless. But Poppy stilled upon seeing it.

In the white infirmary light, everything about him felt surreal. The plain look on his face, the slight hunch of his shoulders, and how the black coat hung off of him. Dazai was standing at the wall beside an occupied cot. Collin Creevey was there—petrified. The boy's eyes were still open, sightless, staring frightfully at the basilisk only he had seen. Dazai's hand hovered just over Collin's head. For once he wasn't wearing his gloves.

Dazai's hand. Covered in blood.

Poppy swallowed.

Row upon row of small cuts from the elbow to the pulse-point of his wrist. *Beat-beat-beating* a sluggish flow of blood.

Dear Merlin, she thought detachedly, *it's worse than I'd thought.*

Poppy's hands shook. "Dear," she gasped, "what happened?" She knew what had happened. Could see it here, plain as day. *Self-harm.* "You—I need to patch this up, okay? You were so right to come to me—"

Dazai eyed her.

There was something... strange. About his expression, now. His eyes were half-lidded and staring.

"Can I touch you?" Poppy asked, though only just for the sake of it. There was no room for hesitation here. All that blood...

She reached forward again.

Dazai sighed.

And suddenly, Poppy realized what was so strange about his expression.

Dazai didn't look scared at all.

Nor surprised, nor even in pain.

Shock, she thought, *he must be in shock.*

Dazai watched her, unblinking.

Then, he asked,

"Who did you tell?"

Poppy startled. Her hands, half-way to staunching the bloody wounds suddenly stilled in the air. Pointless.

"What?"

"About Yokohama."

Poppy gaped.

"How did you..?" She shook herself. "We. We can talk about that later, okay? Your health comes first. Let me—"

Slowly, the hand lingering over Collin's face fell to rest at Dazai's side. The motion brought forth another trail of blood from his forearm. A few drops splattered onto the floor with a *tap!* A spot of red pooled on the tile.

"You told Snape" he interjected. "And... McGonagall?"

A shiver ran down Poppy's spine.

Dazai hummed. Her reaction—automatic—had given him her answer. With an unbloodied hand, Dazai stroked his chin. His face, Poppy now saw, was deathly pale. The sickly pallor said he'd been bleeding for some time now. He looked ill. "The headmaster?"

This time, Poppy managed to force an answer out. "...no," she said, "Mr. Dazai. Hun. I'm. I want to help you, okay? With this," she couldn't tear her eyes off of his cuts, "with the Port Mafia. We'll be careful about it. I just need you to trust me, okay?"

Again, Dazai hummed. She didn't like how empty it sounded. A sound meant to fill the silence, and nothing more.

"Tell me about the petrifications," Dazai said suddenly.

"I—*what?"*

Dazai's eyes fell to Collin.

"There isn't any magic keeping him frozen," he said. Here, Dazai gave his bloody fingers a purposeful wiggle, though Poppy couldn't understand the meaning behind this gesture. A few drops of blood spiralled off at the movement and stained his shoes. "But he isn't moving."

Poppy made another quick jump to grab Dazai's arm—to staunch the bleeding.

This time, he didn't pull away.

Poppy's hand closed around the largest of the cuts. Blood squelched up around her hand, and beaded between the gaps in her fingers. It made a wet *schlk!* sound. The stench of rusty iron flooded the room and Poppy's nostrils, and she gagged.

Dazai let her hold his arm at an awkward angle.

Limp.

"A special potion is needed to cure a petrification," Poppy explained. Hoping against all hope that answering his questions might recover Dazai from whatever morbid shock he'd fallen into.

"Snape isn't brewing it," he commented.

"No," Poppy's fingers pressed tightly against the gashes. *Too many wounds, too much blood! I need bandages now!* "It's a very specific potion. I—*drat it, I can't use episkey! I need—Wingardium Leviosa!"*

She cast the spell out, feeling for where she kept her emergency supplies.

The bandages, the gauze, the antiseptic. All the supplies she'd specially bought after realizing the truth behind Dazai's condition. She had hoped never to need them. But now, Poppy could only feel relief that she'd had the foresight.

A second passed.

The bandages did not appear.

Poppy's brows furrowed.

She... she must have messed up the spell. Too panicked, too flustered, to say it properly.

"If you don't brew the potion, then no one will?" Dazai asked, oblivious to Poppy's worries.

She blinked at him—at his face, now, and not just the swelling red of his arm. He was still watching her. There was nothing behind his eyes.

There was a cold feeling in Poppy's chest.

She pressed harder on Dazai's arm with one hand, and slipped the other into her pocket. Blood smeared across her shirt—*red, red, red!*

"*Wingardium Leviosa!"* she cast again. This time, with a whirl of her wand.

The cold feeling in her chest writhed.

The spell did not cast.

"Ah..." Dazai hummed. "Please stop doing that, or I'll get a headache."

...headache?

Poppy's mouth dropped open as those words washed over her. Her wand hand, rendered useless. The other hand, dripping with tacky blood.

Why... why couldn't she cast?

She was doing everything right. Had even taken a calming breath this time.

She tried once more

Nothing.

Nothing—

The cuts on Dazai's arm continued to bleed at a gushing pace. Poppy swore. And in her haste to pressure the wounds again, she dropped her wand. It clattered against the floor.

Dazai twitched. Poppy felt it beneath her fingers. Then, again, when he suddenly pulled away. The blood was so slick, she immediately lost her girp on him. A fresh burst of blood fell and spattered against the floor grotesquely.

Red, everywhere.

In the white-light, shadowed beneath his bangs and a strange expression, even Dazai's eyes seemed to wear that shade of red.

He mumbled under his breath, *"So that's how much blood you want,* huh?"

"Mr. Dazai," Poppy gasped, "just let me help you—"

She took a step back, closer to the bandages.

Dazai moved to the side. Behind him, the crack in the wall appeared.

A flicker of movement behind stone.

"Since this is the last time we'll talk," Dazai said sedately, "I'll tell you a secret."

Poppy's breath chilled.

Dazai looked away.

And hiding behind the crack, a massive eye blinked once.

"I didn't really mind you as a doctor. But you can't cure a Special Ability, Ma'am."

The basilisk.

The basilisk!

Poppy opened her mouth to scream

The basilisk's stare petrified.

Stone.

Just as Poppy's entire world turned to ice, the last words she hears:

"Dammit. I got blood everywhere. Who's going to clean all this up?"

Chapter End Notes

this chapter is SO long i am so sorry i forgot how long this part was ajlksfjasf

next up: a dueling club.

Dazai vs. Pansy

Chapter Summary

Lockhart's 'Murder Dazai' Club.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They found Pomfrey's petrified body the next morning.

Dazai got away with it, of course. He'd left no evidence behind—slaved over a puddle of blood for a whole hour, smelling like bleach—and had scampered out of the infirmary well before dawn. By breakfast, when her body was discovered, Dazai had carefully feigned surprise. He hadn't eaten breakfast, and had acted too sick to try. Which isn't to say that Dazai escaped suspicion. No, that ship had sailed several months ago when the Daily Prophet decided to start calling him a demon. But there was nothing specific pointing his way, in the end. Dazai smilingly avoided punishment. Which made for something of a perfect conclusion, really.

Still. It was only a matter of minutes before the remaining students of Hogwarts started sending him glances and glares. And only an hour after that, Tracey was the first of many to outright suggest she wished Dazai was dead.

Well, too bad. Dazai wanted that, too. They'd have to bring it up with Mori, and that was a losing battle if Dazai ever saw one.

Dazai thought about this, now, leaning back as far as his office chair would allow. It protested his weight with a creak. Dazai paid it no heed. He was focused only on the newspaper spread out in his hands.

THE DEMON STUDENT STRIKES AGAIN! IS DUMBLEDORE TO BLAME?

This paper had arrived via a fat and friendly brown-feathered owl just that morning. It had flown off without waiting for response shortly after Dazai cut the package from its leg. Tom's letter had arrived just in time to give Dazai something to think about: the public's reaction to the petrification of Poppy. The article had started off like all the rest. Dismissive of the truth in favor of fear-mongering. *Dazai is the devil, the magical community is on the brink, blah blah blah—*

The interesting part came about half-way through.

"During a press conference yesterday, the newly instated Ministry branch, the Department of Education, suggested the replacement of Albus Dumbledore as Hogwarts Headmaster," Rita

Skeeter had written.

Dazai threw aside the paper with a sigh. It slid across the desk, and only nearly didn't fall by a hair, stopping right beside his *World's Okayest Professor* mug. It was empty now—and had been ever since bringing it to Hogwarts. But Dazai still posed it on his desk like a well-won trophy.

He held his hand up, hovering in the air over his head. The bandages around his wrist were especially thick today. And though Pomfrey wasn't dead, only petrified, Dazai felt like his hands were stained anyhow. These were the hands of a killer. The tendons pulled and snapped when he wiggled his fingers, and it felt somehow different than when he'd killed Quirrell last year. Dazai didn't know how to place the feeling, so he pushed it aside indefinitely.

There were several other interesting lines in this latest Daily Prophet article, including his and Snape's rumored kinship and a certain feral dragon. But the news about Madam Pomfrey had by and large swamped them out. That, and DOE's call-to-action: fire Albus Dumbledore.

That was fine. Dazai's hands were out of that mess.

His more pressing problem was McGonagall.

Dazai's eyes narrowed as he stared up at his hand. It blurred when he didn't blink, and a lack of depth-perception made it hard to tell where the bandages stopped and the skin began.

The day after Pomfrey was discovered, McGonagall had pulled him aside to talk. Dazai had briefly worried the idea that she knew—somehow—that he was responsible. That no amount of subterfuge or lie could hide the truth from a magical school.

But luckily, that hadn't been the case. McGonagall had instead told him that his lessons with Snape were hereby cancelled, but she would be expecting him in one week's time for private lessons of her own. She'd said all this with pressed lips and a discerning eye, and Dazai was not blind to the fact that she knew about the Port Mafia. But whatever she was thinking—was seeing in him now—McGonagall did not say. But one week until lessons meant one week of safety before McGonagall decided what to do about his being a mafioso.

Great.

Dazai had one week to convince her to keep her mouth shut.

Unfortunately, that little petrification trick of his would only work once. Once someone realized it was only Dazai's enemies that got petrified...

Dazai dropped his hand to his lap. He'd figure something out. He always did.

Snape was... also a problem. Though less of one, Dazai thought. Because for all Snape could be pushy, Dazai had the man fairly under control. He fell for easy lies, and seemed at all times willing to side with Dazai's innocence. Dazai would figure something out for Snape eventually. But for now, playing his usual cards was best. Still. The whole thing was needlessly exhausting.

No sooner did Dazai slump forward in his chair, did the office door suddenly burst open.

Draco stormed across the room. He slammed his hands on the desk. The resulting *bang!* finally sent Dazai's newspaper tumbling to the ground. Blaise, a few feet behind Draco, shut the door and ambled after him.

"Good evening, you two," Dazai said. He eyed them both for a moment before grabbing his gloves from the desk and slipping them back on.

"Don't *'good evening'* us, Boss!" Draco's palms pressed firmly into the desk, turning white. "What the hell?!"

"You're very noisy today, Draco. But as it happens, I have no idea what you're upset about."

"Madam Pomfrey!"

Blaise finally reached the desk, though he didn't make of show of slamming it like Draco had —for which Dazai was greatful. "She was petrified," he translated. "We were under the impression we had put a stop to those."

Dazai hummed. Riddle's diary was safetly tucked into the pocket of his robes. And though Dazai didn't reach for it now, it suddenly felt more weighty against him. "That diary was just the controller. You know, there's still a wild basilisk loose in the school."

"Ah..." Draco deflated, his shoulders slumping and the mean twist of his face going slack. "I hadn't thought..."

"No worries, the *thinking* part is what I'm here for," Dazai waved them off. "Without the diary here, there's nothing linking the petrifications back to us anymore. We're in the clear— even if things are a little messy."

Draco made a disgruntled face, still clearly upset over something. Blaise, meanwhile, merely tilted his head. "Draco mentioned you wanted to investigate the Chamber of Secrets," he commented. "Do you have any leads on catching the basilisk?"

Dazai blinked. Draco did the same.

"Oh. Right. I was doing that, wasn't I?"

Draco's stare was baffled. "You forgot."

"Of course I didn't forget," Dazai sniffed. "I've just been preoccupied."

Blaise and Draco were giving him odd looks. But before he could say anything about it, there was suddenly a knock at the door.

All three of them immediately stilled.

"Hey. Think that's for us?" Dazai chirped.

Draco shot him a wide-eyed look.

"No one in the gang usually knocks," Blaise pointed out, and Draco nodded a wary agreement.

They knocked again.

Dazai got to his feet. He walked across the room towards the door, very aware of Draco and Blaise's eyes on his back.

"Hold up," Draco said, hurrying after him, "it could be a professor."

Dazai considered that for a few seconds. Then, he shook his head. "Let's find out then, shall we?"

"Wha—Dazai!"

Draco sputtered at his back.

He snorted. "I'm joking! There's only one other person who knows about this place. And I'll bet she's here for the same reason you two are."

Saying this, Dazai swung the door wide open.

Ginny Weasely blinked several times at the suddenly open door.

She had some kind of paper in her hands, and had been reading over it when Dazai greeted her. Upon realizing she was no longer alone, she hastily crumpled it up and stuffed it into the inside pocket of her robe.

"Dazai! W-we need to talk!"

Dazai shot Draco and Blaise a significant look—*I told you so*—then stepped aside so Ginny could enter. She did so quickly. He shut the door soon after glancing around the hallway to make sure they didn't have any eavesdroppers. It was empty, mercifully. Ginny hadn't been spotted entering their secret office.

"Oh, Blaise, Draco. You're here too," Ginny was saying. She was hovering awkwardly by the wall, and hadn't stepped any further in from there. *"Um.* Hello."

"Good evening, Ginny," Blaise greeted.

"Hello," Draco said stiffly. "Don't just barge in here. This is *our* office."

Ginny's eyes snapped to him. She looked to be caught somewhere between righteous and uncertain, so Dazai butted in, "Aren't you the one doing the barging, Draco?" He eyed the desk pointedly. The newspaper was still fallen to floor from when Draco had knocked it earlier.

"I'm in the gang, it's different."

"Sure, sure," Dazai flapped a hand, dismissive.

"Er... I'm not intruding, am I?" Ginny squeaked.

"Ignore Draco, he's just prickly today."

"Huh?!"

Dazai beamed. "What brings you here, Ginny?"

Ginny looked between them, apparently jarred by their bickering. But she straightened up a moment later with a serious look about her. "Madam Pomfrey was petrified a few days ago. Is that...? I mean, I thought you'd..?"

Once again, Dazai turned a look onto Blaise and Draco.

I told you so!

"Woah, it's almost like you and these two share a brain. Creepy~" Dazai sang, feigning shock. At Ginny's confused stare, he reiterated, "It's like I told them: evil diary or not, there's a basilisk in the school attacking people. On the bright side, Ginny, you're not responsible this time! Congrats!"

Ginny faltered, visibly startled by Dazai's cheerful voice, and her face took on a pallid color. She self-conciously rubbed at the back of her neck. "I didn't mean to..."

"We know," Blaise said, sidling up to her. "Dazai is just playing."

"True!" Dazai pipped. "Actually, we were just talking about the petrifications."

He paused.

He *had* been planning to hunt the basilisk down, before Pomfrey. But would involving himself with it now bring unwanted attention? The last thing he needed was drawing a bigger connection between himself and the petrifications—especially not now that he was actually guilty for one. On the other hand, would not investigating raise Snape's suspicions? That guy had to know Dazai was always lying when he said he'd stay out of things...

Avoid things and appease McGonagall?

Or stick his nose in and act how Snape expected?

Despite himself, Dazai's brows were furrowing in thought.

Draco made a weary noise. "Don't make that face. It's nothing but trouble."

"Concurred," Blaise said.

Dazai blinked at them. "I always look like this."

"Only when you're up to no good."

Dazai grinned, and Draco shivered.

"Um."

Ginny was watching them, shifting in place like she wasn't quite sure what she was meant to be doing. But after seeing she had everyone's attention, her spine straightened. Her voice was more sure when she said, "If you're going to do something about the petrifications, I'd like to help. If you'll have me."

"No thanks," Draco said immediately.

"Sure," Blaise said.

They glanced at each other. Then, as one, they looked to Dazai to see who he was going to side with.

"It's just. I owe you for helping me out," Ginny pressed. "And I know you're a nice person, Dazai! Despite what everyone is saying about you."

Oh.

Realization crashed onto Dazai. Ginny's words sparked something in the back of his mind—and killed two of his peskiest birds with one stone.

'I owe you.'

Dazai hunts down the basilisk *for* McGonagall.

An exchange of services! *I stop the petrifications, and in return you kindly don't mention that I'm Port Mafia.* Up until he figured out a way to quietly dispose of her. Though he was hardly going to tell her that last part.

It was perfect! A win all around!

"Oh Merlin," Draco grimaced. "That face is worse. Don't do that."

At some point, Dazai had started grinning like a lunatic. He dialed it up to eleven just to see Draco recoil. "We're definitely," he told them cheerily, "going to hunt down the basilisk. Ginny can join, if she'd like. But she's got to keep it on the down-low."

"Of course! Thank you, Dazai!"

"Sure," he said. "Give me a few days to figure out a plan of action. Or—make that a week. Let's wait for things to die down after Egg first."

"Oh!" Ginny perked up. She looked around the room—the rafters, the desk, the window. "I was wondering where she went! Did... did the professors catch her?"

"No way," Draco sniffed. "My Egg is way too good for that."

"She's around," Blaise said, vague.

"...huh."

In truth, Dazai hadn't seen Egg since the incident the other day. Though he'd caught brief flashes of her magical signature at the edges of his senses, and figured she was enjoying her new-found freedom. It was fine. Dazai was actually rather pleased with this new arrangement, and therefore had done nothing to intercept her.

Basilisk, Port Mafia, Mori's orders. These were Dazai's current biggest concerns. Everything else felt sort of paltry in comparison. "I'm sure she'll show up again at some point," Dazai said, barely giving it any thought.

Blaise scratched his chin. "Though I thought she'd at least be wandering around Yokohama, not here."

Dazai sniffed. "Guess she can't get enough of me?" He laughed tightly. "Just kidding. Dragons are drawn to concentrated magic, right? She probably came back cause she was hungry."

"But... she brought you mail. Didn't she?" Ginny asked.

"That too."

Ginny eyed him, clearly skeptical. And though Draco was making a similar face, neither of them commented on Dazai's evasive answer. Dazai was glad for it, seeing as he was hardly going to tell them what Mori had sent.

Eliminate Poppy Pomfrey.

Yeah. He wasn't going to be saying *that* out loud any time soon.

"We're all on the same page, then?" Dazai asked, looking to each of them for only a brief second before summarily deciding, "Great! I have some research to get done, then. I'll grab all of you once I'm finished."

"Wait!" Ginny suddenly squeaked. Dazai lifted a brow at her. "Don't do that! If you're going to the library, you'll be passing by the Great Hall."

Dazai blinked. "Will I?"

"Yes?"

Dazai nodded several times, as if he already knew that. He did not.

Blaise frowned. "What's wrong with the Great Hall?"

Draco shot them both bewildered looks. "Are you joking? Professor Lockhart's Club is today."

"...his what?" Blaise asked.

"Merlin. You two share one *brain cell*, honestly..."

Blaise shrugged, indifferent, and Dazai beamed. "Blaise is the only one here with brain cell sharing privileges. Draco is just jealous!"

Draco scoffed. "You're insane," he said, plainly. When Ginny smothered a giggle beneath her hand, he puffed up proudly. "Professor Lockhart is hosting his Dueling Club today. You two seriously haven't seen all the posters he put up?"

Dazai and Blaise both shook their heads.

"How? They're absolutely everywhere!"

Ginny nodded, emphatic. She reached into her cloak and pulled out the piece of paper Dazai had seen her reading over earlier. She held it out for him and Blaise to inspect.

"I've been busy with..." Dazai trailed off, making an incredibly vague gesture with one hand. With his free hand, he grabbed the paper—a poster, probably torn off a wall if the glue marks on the back were any indication. It was garishly colored and boasted bold, capital text. An eye-catcher, for sure.

Blaise peered over his shoulder. "And I don't care."

"Ah... classic Blaise."

"And classic Dazai. What kind of answer is that?"

Dazai ignored him. Instead, he read Lockhart's poster.

DUELING CLUB

was the title. Then,

LEARN SELF-DEFENSE WITH GILDEROY LOCKHART!!

NEVER BE SCARED OF DEMONS AGAIN!! DEFEAT YOUR ENEMIES!!

GILDEROY LOCKHART!!!!

"...he wrote his name twice," Dazai commented with a grimace.

"Nevermind that!" Draco crossed his arms. "It's barely even a dueling club, as far as I can tell. I've been hounding my... my father to get one of those started at Hogwarts since first year. But this is more like Lockhart is training our classmates on how to beat you up."

"Yeah, I picked up on that too," Dazai said. He skimmed the paper once more. Sure enough, that was today's date, and a time only about thirty-minutes past. He handed it to Blaise for the other boy to read. "He's too inept to even kill me himself."

"That is not the takeaway here, Dazai."

Dazai shrugged.

Blaise, who was reading over the poster with a blank face, said, "Ginny is right, Dazai. You should avoid this."

"You think?" Dazai asked, genuine.

Blaise nodded. "It's not safe."

"And you don't need any more bad press," Draco added. "Can you imagine? If Professor Lockhart sees you anywhere near the Great Hall today, he'll never shut up about it."

"Well, that much is true."

Blaise frowned, and finally looked up from the poster. It still hung between his hands, folded and crumpled in an ugly way that didn't befit the otherwise colorful paper. He eyed Dazai.

"...what?" Dazai asked.

His eyes narrowed, and Dazai's spine straightened under the scrutiny. Blaise was giving him one of those looks again. He didn't like that whatsoever. Last time Blaise had looked at him like that, it had been followed up by an awful lecture about trust and emotions and *yuck!*

"What?" He asked again, more urgently this time.

"Why did I hear a *'but'* in there?" Blaise eventually said.

Draco whirled on him, as well. "Don't tell me you want to crash Professor Lockhart's Dueling Club!"

"You two have no faith in me," Dazai protested. He puffed out his cheeks childishly, and Draco rolled his eyes. Blaise only continued to stare.

Ginny looked wildly between them. "What's going on?"

Blaise finally tore his burning stare off of Dazai to tell Ginny, "once you've known Dazai for awhile, it's easy to tell when he's planning something stupid." Here, he looked back to Dazai. "You want to go to the Dueling Club."

Dazai threw his hands up, feigning shock. "Woah! You caught me."

"Are you suicidal?! Everyone there is learning how to attack you!" Draco spat.

Dazai smiled sunnily. "Yeah! It sounds fun!"

Ginny choked.

That dreadful emotion in Blaise's eyes darkened. Dazai quickly pivoted.

"Anyway, won't Lockhart be sad if his villain doesn't make an appearance? Imagine all of his fans when this chapter of his stupid book doesn't write itself. All those teary-eyed prepubescent brats will be my fault!"

"Since when do you care what that guy is feeling?"

"Since he started a Murder Dazai Club, I think."

Mori's voice echoed in his head, as did a dizzying feeling like he was dancing the waltz. *'Make them fear you.'* This Dueling Club was an opportunity shining gold and inviting. He'd be stupid not to grab it.

Ginny and Draco both shifted uncomfortably at Dazai's candid answer, but Dazai steamrolled over them. "I'm only going to check it out," he said while clicking his tongue. "You can't convince me otherwise—I'm really going no matter what you say."

Blaise lifted a brow. "What happened to *'waiting for things to die down?'"* he asked, not-so subtly prodding Dazai in the side with an elbow.

"That's different," Dazai told him.

He couldn't tell them that Mori had all but asked him to make trouble. Or that the Egg fiasco had caught him completely off-guard, and he was only trying to take back a little ground of his own. At the series of blank looks he was receiving, Dazai eventually explained, "Lockhart and I have some kind of hero-villain dynamic. I ought to make a grand entrance for him at some point."

They all gave him weird looks—Blaise's the blankest, and therefore most concerning, of the lot.

Having had enough of this conversation by a mile, Dazai promptly opened the office door and stepped out into the empty hallway.

"Hey!" Draco shouted, then he was hurrying after Dazai. A second later, Ginny and Blaise were doing the same. "You—" Draco stop-started. But it must have been obvious that Dazai wouldn't be stopping anytime soon. He sighed, big and heavy, and gruntingly told Dazai, "where are you trying to go? The Great Hall isn't that way at all!"

Dazai whirled around to face them, eyes wide and bewildered. "Seriously?"

-

Before they even reached the Great Hall, Dazai could hear it.

Lockhart's booming voice, calling out, *"now, now, students! Just like I showed you!"*

Followed by a chorus of *"yes, sir"* and a single stray, *"you didn't show us anything, you dolt!"*

But it was loud enough that, before Draco had even shown them around the last corner, Dazai already knew they'd reached their destination. It had him instantly on edge. Loud noises had always bothered him. Crowded spaces moreso. And it was looking more-and-more like Lockhart's stupid club was going to be both of those things. Joy. Add the fact that Lockhart was here as the cherry on top and, well...

It was a good thing Dazai had spent some amount of his first year practicing self-restraint, because he was already itching to *incendio* something right now.

When the door to the Great Hall finally came into view, Draco cleared his throat.

"Er... you three go in without me."

Dazai lifted a brow. Even though the cacophony of the Dueling Club was surely loud enough to smother his voice, Dazai still replied in a muted tone. "Stage fright?" he teased.

Draco shot him a quelling look. "I don't want to be seen wandering around with you lot," he corrected a bit meanly. "I'll follow in a few minutes, so no one thinks we were together."

Dazai placed a hand over his heart in mock offense.

"If... if you don't mind me asking," Ginny squeaked. Draco glanced at her with a look that clearly said, *I do mind, but go ahead.* "Why weren't you already at the Great Hall? If you've always wanted a dueling club, I mean."

Unexpectedly, Draco's cheeks heated and he looked away.

Blaise tilted his head. "Well, he was busy hanging out with Dazai and me. Right?"

"Wha—I guess. But don't say it like that, Blaise," Draco protested. "You make me sound mushy."

Blaise nodded shrewdly.

Suddenly, Lockhart's voice echoed out from the Great Hall. Dazai clamped a hand over one ear to smother the boom even slightly.

"Very good, Miss Granger! Ten points to Ravenclaw—wait, you're Gryffindor, aren't you, girl?"

Dazai perked up. "Hermione joined the club?"

Ginny spun to face Dazai. "I think Luna went as well!" She blinked, then hastily amended, "N-not to spite you, or anything! She said she was protesting!"

Dazai snorted. Imagining Luna arguing with Lockhart about exorcists was an undeniably amusing image. He shook his head to dislodge the thought, and said to Draco, "you should find Pansy—I bet she's here. You three aren't still fighting, are you?" Here, he looked to Blaise as well.

When he really thought back on these last several days, Dazai couldn't recall ever having seen the three of them together. It was strange, considering before Winter Break they were a trio all their own (discounting when Blaise saw fit to sit with Dazai, instead—or when Draco snuck off to do the same). Though, if Dazai was being honest, he hadn't been the most observant person these last few days. Too caught up in his own head, running over the mess that was Mori's latest missive. He ought to remedy that lapse, if he didn't want Mori yelling at him come May.

Draco's face twisted painfully.

...Guess things were still sore between them, then.

Dazai shrugged internally. The less Pansy, the better, he thought. Still, "or not," he said, noncomittal. "But if you want to see if her gang is planning anything, I won't stop you."

Draco's expression pinched, looking slightly offended. Blaise, beside him, lifted a solitary brow.

But Draco only folded his arms over his chest, and stiffly said, "she won't plan anything else."

"...else?" Ginny squeaked.

It had been several months now, and Dazai's cheek no longer stung painfully at the memory of Crabbe's fist embedding itself there. He rolled his shoulders. "I'm going to sneak in, then," Dazai told them cheerily. "You all behave yourselves, now."

He turned on his feet to skip off to the Great Hall, and a second later the hurried footsteps of Ginny and Blaise joined him—albeit with less cheer. Understandably—Dazai was laying it on a little thick. He waved a quick goodbye to Draco, and made a silent promise to look for the other boy in the crowd a bit later.

But first...

When they got to the main door, Dazai slowed his pace abruptly. Ginny and Blaise followed suit. Eventually he came to a stop just at the edge of the door, sneakily peeking around the wall.

It was still obnoxiously noisey in the Great Hall, and now Dazai could see why. It must have been almost every student in there! The Great Hall was big, and many of the students hadn't returned for second semester, but there was still a massive swarm of kids taking up space there. They were lined up in seemingly arbitrary pairs and pointing their wands at one another. The only thing making room for everyone was that all the tables had been pushed aside to the edges of the Hall.

It didn't take long for Dazai to find Hermione. She was close to the front of the room, practicing with an older Ravenclaw girl Dazai didn't know. Even from here, Dazai could feel the *zing* of magic when she flicked her wand. A second later, the Ravenclaw's pale, stumpy wand suddenly flew out of her hands and clattered against the floor several feet to her left. Lockhart was standing by them, grinning and sparkling and what else. And—

"Oh!" Dazai bounced on his heels. "Snape is here!" He squinted. "Why is Snape here?"

Sure enough, Professor Snape was standing stiff as a statue near the back wall. His arms were crossed tight over his chest, and his glare was drilling a hole in the back of Lockhart's head. If Dazai didn't know any better, he might think Snape was a mafioso himself, with that kind of malicious aura.

"Supervising lessons?" Ginny guessed. She was on the tips of her toes trying to peak around Dazai without leaving her cover behind him.

"Supervising Professor Lockhart?" Blaise tossed his own two cents in.

Dazai snorted. Judging by that mean glare? Definitely the latter. After a moment, Dazai saw fit to tell them this, and Ginny made a sound that might have been a sigh.

A part of Dazai itched to say hello to his favorite curmudgeonly professor. But the rest of his good sense kept his feet rooted in place. Snape knew about the Port Mafia, now. And had promptly cancelled all of their remedial lessons. Dazai frowned, observing Snape from across the room, and worked at his tongue with his teeth. Snape always had Dazai's back, in the end, and he didn't think that was any less true now. But the gulf of the Port Mafia sat between them now and, oddly, that curdled something in his stomach to think about.

Absentmindedly, Dazai scratched at his wrist. But the bandages were so thick he barely even felt it, and he soon dropped his hands with a dissatisfied breath. The cuts underneath were healed over by now and no longer bled when agitated. But they itched like nothing else. A quiet nagging always at the corner of his thoughts. He couldn't scratch them, though, or risk opening them up again.

"...Dazai?"

He blinked out of his thoughts to glance at Blaise. *"Hm?"*

"What are you thinking?" He asked, paused, then asked instead, "Are you okay?"

Dazai's nose scrunched up. "I'm trying to figure out what spell that is," he lied.

Blaise made a face that said nothing at all. Then he opened his mouth to say—

"Expelliarmus. The Disarming Charm," a new voice interrupted.

Dazai recoiled. He nearly fell into the Great Hall, if it weren't for Blaise's quick hands pulling him upright. Ginny shrilled and jumped about a half-foot into the air.

Percy Weasley eyed them coolly from across the hall.

His gaze lingered on Dazai for a few long seconds before moving to Blaise and Ginny. Percy had one hand on his hip, and he wore a closed-off, contemplative expression. He lifted the other hand in a pacifying gesutre, "Apologies," he said, sincere, and took several steps forward until he was no longer a looming figure at the end of the corridor. "I didn't mean to startle you all. Are you okay?"

"Percy!" Ginny yipped. "You scared me! Don't creep around like that!"

He smiled smally, fondly. "As I said, my apologies."

Ginny pouted.

"Though," Percy said. Once again, that pensive expression was back on his face when he looked to Dazai and Blaise, "you should expect to be startled, sneaking around like you are. What are you doing?"

Miraculously, everyone turned their eyes onto Dazai to answer.

He grinned, and took a purposeful step out of the Great Hall's line of sight just in case. "Joining Lockhart's Dueling Club," Dazai told him. This was mostly true, but Percy still made a face like he didn't believe it. Dazai propped both hands up on his hips. "What about you? Shouldn't Percy be in there, learning how to *expelliarmus* children?"

Percy grimaced, his eyes flicking off to the side for a brief, uncomfortable moment. He cleared his throat and said, "I do not... approve of Professor Lockhart's Dueling Club," he gave a look that Dazai supposed was meant to be conciliatory. "So I'm patrolling the area. It seems my efforts have paid off—now tell me what you three are doing sneaking around out here."

"Percy," Ginny scolded. When she spoke to Percy, Dazai realized, she wore a different tone of voice. This Ginny was argumentative, and confident—not at all the uncertain Ginny that had shakingly told him about Riddle's diary. Nor, even, the Ginny who had knocked on his office door just that morning. "We're really just looking around."

"...right," Percy said. He eyed Dazai. It was difficult to hear him over the sound coming from the Great Hall.

"Dazai is my friend!" She said ardently.

Percy said nothing to this, just narrowed his eyes at them.

"I want to learn that spell," Dazai cut-in, not liking the look Percy was giving him and wishing to distract it. He indicated to the Great Hall with a thumb. "But I also don't want to get mauled yet, so we're sneaking around the edges for now."

"I'm sure your friends can teach you," Percy said, eyes flicking to the Great Hall and back warily. Something pressed between his brows, and he conceded an uncertain, "You're right. It isn't safe for you here. Go back to wherever it is you hang out all day and night."

Dazai frowned. "You mean the dorms?"

Percy blinked several times. Hastily, he said, "yes, the dorms."

Blaise briefly met Dazai's eyes. A line of silent communication passed between them, and Blaise promptly dug his heels in. "As a prefect, should you really be denying a student his education?"

"What?" Percy stared. He shook his head, disbelieving.

"Yeah!" Dazai agreed. "I'm going to flunk out because of you, specifically."

"You're going to flunk out because you don't do your homework," Percy told him, clearly exasperated with their antics. "If you need a tutor—"

Dazai blew a raspberry.

Percy's mouth clicked shut.

From the Great Hall, an excited cheer rose up, *"I did it! I did it!"*

"Congratulations, children! You're not quite at my level, but it was an admirable attempt!" Lockhart said.

Dazai rolled his eye.

Well. Someone had to knock Lockhart down a peg.

He rolled his shoulders and fixed the hang of Mori's coat over him. Between the coat, the tangle of bandages over his eye, and the annoyed look tightening his face, Dazai figured he probably looked a mean picture. Scarier even than that shadow-figure the Daily Prophet used to advertise in his place before they had a picture of him.

Ever on the same page, Blaise straightened beside him.

It was evident the exact moment Percy and Ginny realized that Dazai was about to go running in, because they also tensed up. Though not in the same, readied way that Blaise had. They looked like they were watching a plane crash in real time.

"Mr. Dazai," Percy said carefully, "if you go in there, I cannot guarantee you will not be hurt. Have you—did you read the poster?"

Ginny's hand raised to her chest, where the poster was again folded up and pocketed. "He knows what the club is about, Percy."

"And you still—"

"I'm going to check it out," Dazai said. He beamed at Blaise. "Ready to make a grand entrance?"

"I don't do grand entrances."

"First time for everything!"

Percy reached out to stop him. "Dazai—wait—!"

But it was too late. Dazai had already made up his mind, and had started on a dead-set path straight into the Great Hall.

It was noisier inside.

That was the first thing Dazai noticed. Out in the hallway, the clamor was just that—*clamor*. A big, continuous bang! of voices coalescing into something loud and indecipherable. It reminded Dazai a lot of the quidditch match he'd attended a few months ago. Loud shouting that coming up from the crowd that sounded less like words and more like a massive beast growling. Now that he was close enough to not only make out coherent conversations, but to feel the sting of all their cast spells simultaneously...

If dealing with Lockhart didn't give him a headache, Dazai was sure everyone else would. Still. He must have done a good job keeping the pained grimace from his face, because for once Blaise didn't make some remark about it.

It was easier to sneak into the club than Dazai had initially anticipated. The students were busy practicing spells in pairs, and only occasionally looked away to gather up their fallen wands from the floor. That, and the noisy excitement in the air kept people from turning when Dazai entered. Just another student arriving to learn the Disarming Charm, they probably thought, not the object of all their anger. Regardless, it kept Dazai's 'grand entrance' less than grand.

After a few seconds of observing the crowd, Blaise gently nudged Dazai. Once he had Dazai's attention, he inclined his head towards one of the groups in particular.

Dazai followed his gaze.

Pansy.

She had her arms crossed stiffly over her chest, wand nowhere to be seen. Tracey and Milli were practicing in a duo off to her right. In the time Dazai watched them, Millicent had successfully cast *Expelliarmus* twice, while Tracey had yet to even manage it once. Her cheeks were a bright, tomato red that Dazai could see all the way across the room. On Pansy's other side, Crabbe and Goyle were paired up. But even from this distance, Dazai could see they were actually just playing rock-paper-scissors. Snape was standing nearby, rubbing at his forehead agitatedly.

"Oh!" Ginny bounced on her heels. "I see Luna! I'm gonna say hi."

Dazai turned just in time to watch Ginny dash away into the crowd. He spotted her again a few seconds later. The pale-haired head of Luna Lovegood just barely peeked over the cluster of students by the far wall. But Dazai could could see how she perked up when Ginny arrived, and a second later she stretched up on her toes to wave wildly in Dazai's direction.

Dazai lifted a hand in return.

"Just us, now," Blaise said, and a quick glance around revealed that Draco had yet to make his own appearance. "Want to find Hermione?"

Still over by Lockhart, Dazai really didn't want to talk with her right now. But looking around, she was the only other Hound present at Lockhart's lesson. The twins weren't around, and neither was Ron.

Searching for his friends, Dazai's eyes nearly skipped over the mop of ginger hair lingering by the door.

Upon catching Dazai's eyes, Percy quickly looked away to observe the other students.

So he was done wandering the halls, now? Dazai's eyes narrowed. But his chance to silently observe Percy was stolen away just a second later.

"He's here!"

Dazai's head whipped so fast, his neck strained.

And just as Dazai had hurried to find the source of the scream—somewhere near Luna; had they seen her wave?—so too did everyone else.

Dazai changed his mind. The Great Hall wasn't pandemonium before. It was now.

Screaming from every corner of the room. Panicked and threatening.

"The demon!"

"Quick! Try the spells we learned!"

"Chase him out!"

"Ah! I don't know th-the spell yet!"

"Forget spells, just throw your wand at him!"

A single wand shot out of the crowd. It missed Dazai by several feet, and clattered uselessly against his shoe.

"Students!" Percy hollered. He appeared at Dazai's side, and briefly met the mafioso's eye before taking a firm step in front of him. Percy held a single hand out in front of him, unyielding. "That's quite enough of that!"

"He can't be here!" Someone in the crowd roared disagreement.

"This is meant to be a safe place!" Another yelled.

"Yeah! We're doing everyone a favor chasing him out!"

Another wave of clamor echoed this.

"He is a student," Percy growled, "Just as you all are. And if I see you attacking him one more time—"

"Oh, come on! Everyone knows he's guilty of-of everything!"

"It's only because he's Professor Snape's son that he's even still alive! Otherwise Lockhart would have killed 'em by now!"

Several people laughed in the crowd.

Percy full-body recoiled.

Beside him, Blaise suddenly grabbed Dazai's hand and pulled. Dazai couldn't take his eyes off the swarm of angry students. The threats all around. After a few attempts, Blaise stopped trying to pull him into the hall, and instead only held Dazai's hand in silent support.

Then—

"That. Is. Enough!"

The entire Great Hall went dead silent.

Snape stormed through the crowd. He parted it with every stomping step, with every glare. The malice in his expression was doubled what it had been earlier. His brows at a sharp, angry angle. His lip so curled Dazai could see bared teeth. And the fire in his eyes—

Dazai didn't shiver. He had seen worse.

But he saw, around the entire room, everyone take in a collective breath.

A beast had just woken in the depths of Snape's eyes.

"Sir," Percy said with a measured voice.

Snape's eyes snapped to him, and Percy's back straightened painfully straight. But he drew his shoulders in a second later. A stone wall. The hush of the Great Hall only made his next words feel all the more significant. "Sir, I... I believe this club to be unsafe as it is now. Any club that exists solely to antagonize a student is not permitted at Hogwarts on the basis of harassment."

Snape stared at Percy for a long moment, his expression unreadable except for the burning anger.

Percy cleared his throat, and continued, "At... at least let me escort Mr. Dazai away."

Another moment passed—a quiet murmur amongst the students.

Snape's eyes flicked to Dazai. He was still half-ducked behind Percy. But when their eyes met, something strange shifted on Snape's face. He looked away very quickly.

To Percy, he said, "get him out of here."

"What?"

"I knew it! He is Dazai's dad!"

Snape whirled on the crowd. "Practice your spells quietly or I expel all of you!"

Several people shrieked—Hermione's the shrillest amongst them.

Percy watched the crowd for another long moment. It was evident that no one would be resuming their club until Dazai left. Despite Snape's command, everyone was still standing together, glaring daggers his way. Dazai stared right back, nonplussed.

Blaise gave him a little tug.

"This was a bad idea," Blaise whispered in his ear. "Let's go."

"What?" Dazai blinked, brows furrowing harshly. "I can't leave now."

Percy spun around to face them. He placed a hand on one shoulder each, Blaise and Dazai, and didn't pull off even when Dazai made a disgruntled face. "You can, and you will."

Dazai ignored him. He wretched his shoulder back until Percy was no longer coralling him. "Everyone will get too cocky if I just run away," he said.

The Port Mafia is not a bunch of good-for-nothing cowards. Not for the first time this school year, that rule was going to land Dazai in a world of trouble.

But. There was no backing down from a challenge. And anyway, wasn't this the kind of hysteric fear Mori wanted..? It was only up to Dazai now to weather the blow.

"'Get too—'" Percy stared at him, wide-eyed as if trying to translate Dazai's meaning. He shook himself. "Forget it. You will leave now," here, he again placed a hand on Dazai's shoulder. His grip was tighter this time, and clearly meant to say, you will do as I say. Doing this, he turned both Dazai and Blaise around and began marching them towards the door. "And you will not leave your room until another prefect comes to tell you it is safe."

A hundred eyes bore into their back. Dazai thought he could feel them.

"Leaving without a word, *huh?"* Percy did not stop shoving him out the door, even when Lockhart called over the crowd.

For the second time, Dazai squirmed out of Percy's grasp. The prefect cursed and immediately tried to grab him again, but Dazai could be slippery when he wanted to be. He turned around and gave Lockhart a massive grin. "And you only wait until I'm leaving to say something, Hero?"

Lockhart's sparkling smile flickered, briefly, into something red hot. He covered it quickly. "Now, now. Severus here seemed to have everything under control."

"God forbid you have to actually do something for once, Sir," Dazai said.

Again—another paper-thin crack in Lockhart's otherwise perfect facade splintered. Dazai chuckled for effect, but felt it sounded a little brittle.

The hero and the villain.

And no matter how you looked at it, Dazai was certainly the villain here. But the role of villain fit Dazai best. His blood was mafia black, after all. Lockhart was no hero, but surely he was at least human, which qualified him in ways Dazai couldn't match. But regardless of how well he fit his role, Dazai couldn't help the way his shoulders drew together, and the corners of his lips pinched slightly. All eyes were on him, and Dazai couldn't stand it. When he tried to brush this discomfort off, he let his one eye darken into something miserable. Black.

"Mr. Dazai," Snape and Percy warned at the same time.

Lockhart laughed boisterously. Dazai might have flinched if he weren't steeling himself up like a traitor in the torture rooms down below Port Mafia headquarters. Lockhart, unflappable in this regard, gestured for Dazai to come to him. He was still standing by the very front of the Great Hall, just below the stage whereupon the staff ate. The table had also been cleared from this area.

"Such bold words for an illiterate demon!" Lockhart chortled. He continued waving at Dazai when he didn't come forward for several seconds. "Come, come! If the beast invites itself to our training grounds, surely it comes expecting a fight!"

Dazai stared.

Then, he took a step forward.

Lockhart beamed terribly, and Blaise whispered something sharp at Dazai's back that he couldn't make out over the sudden rumble of the crowd.

A low, warning growl slipped from Snape's throat. It was so strangely animalistic that Dazai briefly stopped walking to shoot the man a bemused look.

"Gilderoy," Snape growled, "you cannot fight a child."

Lockhart scoffed. "I am about to commit an act of great heroism for the people, Severus! *Bah!* Just consider this a practice round, will that satisfy you?"

"You don't want to train him, you want to hurt him!" Snape snapped.

Lockhart's eyes nervously flashed in Snape's direction, but he was all show a second later. He grinned imploringly to all his fans. "Listen to the voices of our students, Severus! They're all just begging me to save them! Isn't that right, children?"

It was silent for a moment.

Then, a voice from the crowd, *"y-yeah!"*

And just like that, the dam broke loose.

"Expel him!"

"Beat the demon in a duel!"

"Kill him!"

"Now!"

"Quick!"

"The villain!"

"Our hero!"

The cheers grew louder and louder until Snape's complaints could no longer be heard. Lockhart's smile seemed to grow in proportion to his fans' enthusiasm, and by the time din had reached eardrum-breaking levels, his smile looked practically maniacal. He kept beckoning Dazai forward. Now, his wand was out in one hand.

Dazai forced his heart to still.

The shouting, the close quarters, the eyes. He pushed it all away into the furthest reaches of his consciousness. Because emotions like that were sloppy. Sloppy like leaving behind a half-burnt letter, or giving Mori the opportunity to set his dragon loose on the school. Dazai was an executive now, and sloppy wasn't an option.

A true mafioso.

Pomfrey's frozen body proved it. Proved what he needed to be.

So Dazai very carefully felt nothing when the crowd roared loud enough it vibrated under his skin. This was the job.

Snape was still yelling something that Dazai couldn't hear. At some point, he had begun stomping after Dazai towards the main stage. But not before Dazai came to a stop just before Lockhart.

The students were giving them a wide berth.

"Gilderoy!" Snape's yell echoed above the din.

Like banging a gavel, the outrageous yelling suddenly quieted. There was still a rumble of conversation around them, but nothing so deafening.

"Severus," Lockhart huffed. His whole demeanor befit someone putting on a show. "Mr. Dazai brought himself here. It's only fair to show him his place."

Someone whistled in the crowd.

Snape stormed across the room, and finally came to a firm stop just in front of Dazai. "Do not pretend you mean only to treat him as another club member, Gilderoy."

Lockhart laughed. "Very true! I am only a teacher second, after all!"

Dazai inched around Snape so they were standing side-by-side. Snape shot him a severe glare, lips pulled into a thin line, but otherwise did not move.

Predictably, Lockhart needed no prompting to continue, "First and foremost, I am a Champion of the People!"

This hung in the air for a few seconds. Then, half the crowd shouted out their support.

Percy stared at the masses, wide-eyed. Dazai saw him at the corners of his vision, trying ineffectually to quiet the students. Nearby him, Blaise was glaring daggers at Lockhart. The unusually emotional fire burning in him had Dazai briefly stupefied. And at some point, Draco had also entered the Great Hall to stand with Blaise. Their whole demeanor was shadowed with something dark and piercing, pointed straight at the showboating, oblivious Defense professor. Then, Lockhart spoke again and stole Dazai's attention back to the main conflict at hand.

"As such, it is my primary duty to save these poor children from the demon in their midst!" Lockhart waved his arms in a flourish. His wand jutted out, and Snape and Dazai both winced. "Of course, I will protect them from the petrifications by defeating the basilisk this demon has set loose! But first—"

"Wanna bet?" Dazai chirped.

A great hush fell over the students. What was a roar before would now betray even the sound of a pin dropping.

Snape's head snapped to him. "Problem Child, shut up," he whispered.

Lockhart blinked several times before recollecting himself. "Pardon me?"

"I said, *'wanna bet?'"* Dazai smilingly took a step forward and out of Snape's protective shadow. Snape cursed. "I bet," he said, "I can kill the basilisk before you can, O Mighty Hero."

A series of low whispers lanced through the crowd.

A single bead of sweat slid down Lockhart's chin. He laughed nervously. "Defeat the monster you set loose? I hardly—"

Dazai lifted a brow. "You're a coward, then? You won't even try?"

"I—" Lockhart's face flushed red. He sent several frantic looks to the students around them, then barked, "Of course I can kill the basilisk before you!"

Dazai nodded, his entire mien suddenly quite smug. Lockhart ground his teeth so hard, Dazai thought he heard something break. When Snape cursed something else at his back, Dazai spoke louder to ensure his message would reach every ear, "Only the winner has a right to call themselves Champion of the People," Dazai named his prize, "After I defeat the basilisk and save Hogwarts from its plague of petrifications, I'll expect you to call me that."

Several people in the crowd choked.

"Ha!" Lockhart sharped a little manically. "I won't lose to the likes of you! I-isn't that right, my adoring fans?!"

This time, it was a breath of several seconds before the students rose up in agreement.

Dazai's bravado had summoned a tension in the room.

"Mr. Dazai," Snape warned. "Do not dig your nose deeper into this mess. I'm trying to protect you—"

So you haven't changed you mind about me? Dazai thought with a jolt of surprise, *Even knowing what I am?* That realization lingered for only a second. Warm like honeyed tea. But when Dazai looked over his shoulder, and saw the sheer panic on Snape's face, he felt cold once again. And only once he had met Snape's eyes head on, did he declare, "It's a deal, then."

The basilisk defeated, and I don't get expelled. He tried to project this thought with a steady stare.

Snape's eyes widened minutely.

Then Lockhart was laughing again, and Dazai had to look away.

Lockhart was sparkling as ever, but something about him now seemed a little harried. Dazai grinned at it.

"Ah, what a shame! We can't duel now," Dazai said, "if you want to beat me fair-and-square, defeating me early is just cheating. I think your book will be lacking for it."

"N-nonsense!" Lockhart faltered. But Dazai could see it in the way his eyes lit up, and he surreptitiously glanced to the gathered students—he agreed with Dazai's reasoning. The basilisk bet was a better chapter for his story, and defeating Dazai now would kill the tension. Or some other nonsense. Honestly, Dazai hoped Lockhart choked on his book. Lockhart shook his head like he was steadying himself. "Afraid to be defeated in duel, aren't you? Well, I suppose I could have pity on you—"

"If you're going to be a coward, then I'll duel Dazai!" Pansy yelled across the crowd, pushing her way through Crabbe and Goyle's mocking laughter. She already had her wand out.

Snape bristled at Dazai's back.

Lockhart blinked several times, bewildered, before grinning twice as wide as he had before. He clapped. "Perfect! Miss—*uh*—this lovely young lady can teach Mr. Dazai just what my Dueling Club is all about!"

He said 'teach' with the affect of someone who really meant 'put him in his place.'

"I will not allow—"

"Psh! Please, Severus! It isn't like she's actually going to hurt him. They're both only children, after all!"

Pansy's eyes were burning with a livid fercocity. The same look she'd been wearing ever since Winter Break ended.

"Duel me," Pansy reiterated, voice firm. Her wand was held straight out. At that angle, it was unmitakably a weapon.

"Drop the wand," Snape warned.

"No, no, no!" Lockhart hushed giddily. "Let them fight! It's a perfect plot for chapter five!"

"Gilderoy, you are not helping!"

Dazai ignored their bickering. Instead, he watched Pansy dully. The wand, still aimed straight at him, quivered slightly in the air. She seemed to be breathing quite heavily. But Dazai could tell it wasn't fear shaking her hand, only anger and desperation. He told her, "I've said this before, but I'll say it again. Pansy, I don't care enough about you to want to—"

"Draw. Your. Wand!"

Every word was emphasized with a stab of her wand in the air.

'Waving it around like that is bound to get someone hurt,' Snape had told him several months ago.

Dazai grit his teeth. Guess someone was getting hurt, then. He mustered up some charm for show, then said, "There's never any convincing you, Pansy."

"Convince me with a duel," she spat.

Dazai nodded dourly. When he withdrew his wand from his coat, Snape sucked in a breath.

"Problem Child, put your wand away. Both of you."

Dazai blew him off. He held his wand out, just like Pansy's.

"Good," she said, "good."

Lockhart, one hand on Snape's shoulder to hold him back, had a laugh like a child's. "Well, it's not the proper way to start a duel," he said, "but it's certainly dramatic! Now, you two, as supervisor, I have to remind you that I'm in now way responsible if you maim one another! Okay?"

Niether Dazai nor Pansy blinked.

A ripple of unease stilled the crowd.

Percy was watching with wide eyes, and a twitching stance like he wanted to run forward. Near him, Blaise and Draco looked ill.

"Then without further ado," Lockhart paused. "Let the duel begin!"

His voice boomed out across the Great Hall.

Pansy moved immediately.

"Immobulus!"

Cold and sharp energy burst out from Pansy's wand.

Dazai felt it before it fully cast. Thinking quick, he narrowly dodged the beam of stabbing blue magic. His hair whipped frantically.

The spell missed him by an inch.

It collided with a wall a moment later. A fracture of ice spawned over several rows of brick.

"Stay still, damn you!" Pansy cursed. She threw her wand out wildly, *"Immobulus! Immobulus!"*

Stabbing, freezing—

Dazai ducked to the left. Both spells flew wide over his head.

Somewhere to the side, Snape swore, "this isn't a duel, this is a brawl!"

Snape lifted his own wand in defense. But before he could cast any counterspells, another blast of Immobulus had him staggering back several feet.

Pansy stomped forward. "You ruin everything!" she shrilled, "You ruin my friends, you ruin this school—you can't even get spelled properly! *Incendio!"*

Fire fanned out of her wand-tip.

The flames were massive. Large enough to burn even the bystanders several yards away.

Screams poured out from around them. People ducked and ran to avoid being seared. A clamor of feet pounding on stone sounded like even the most enthusiastic of cheerers was now desperately attempting to flee the Great Hall.

Dazai closed his eyes and braced.

If I don't dodge, he thought, heart thudding, No Longer Human will—!

He twisted his wand.

"Invia Obice!" Dazai cast.

He'd only seen it cast once before, by Professor McGonagall. But he remembered how it felt. The cool, calm wash of the spell. The result like a thousand tightly-wound knots.

A wall of blue rose up from the floor and covered half of the entire Great Hall.

He felt a sudden pressure in the base of his skull. But it was only pushing, and not stabbing. A reminder of his limitations and nothing more

The massive burst of fire exploded against the shield spell. It kicked and roared and groaned. The air was sticky with heat. But the shield held. The fires burnt away.

Dazai breathed out.

Shock flashed across Pansy's face. Her wand hand dropped for just a second.

Dazai leapt at the lapse.

He threw off one glove—nullification poised.

He bolted through the *Invia Obice* barrier, dispelling it with a wave of his wand hand to disguise the power of No Longer Human. The wall vanished in a shimmer of blue lights.

Pansy screeched. She stabbed her wand out again.

"E-expelliarmus!"

But Dazai was faster.

He grabbed her wand arm.

Expelliarmus crackled under his palm. No Longer Human killed it.

Pansy froze. She blinked into his eye, aghast.

Dazai dug his fingers into her arm. His nails broke skin. Blood.

With a great force, he yanked.

Snap!

A crack echoed.

It was silent for a moment, then—

Pansy screamed.

She dropped her wand immediately. It clattered on the floor and rolled several feet away. Screaming, Pansy cradled her wand arm.

The arm hung limply in her hold. It was bent out at a strange angle half-way through. Broken. He'd broken her arm.

Pansy just kept screaming.

And screaming.

She was done, wand forgotten to her pain. No more frantic spells left her mouth—just one continuous, agonized howl.

The duel was over.

Once it was clear the that he had won, Dazai took several steps back. Pansy didn't react to his giving her space. She only hunched further into herself, and slowly sunk to the ground. Dazai put his wand away before turning to the crowd.

All of the dozen-or-so students that remained were staring at him in horror.

Dazai looked to Lockhart instead. The Defense professor was as pale as a ghost, and looked just as horrified as the children. He gawped silently for a number of seconds.

Snape shifted beside him, and Dazai looked to him instead.

"You," Snape said. His voice was raw, but tight with severity. Dazai blinked up at him. "Go back to your dorm. Now."

He didn't wait for Dazai's response before rushing to Pansy's side. He muttered the spell Episkey, and although the bleeding stopped, the arm was still decidedly broken. *"Shit. Poppy, we really need you,"* Snape prayed under his breath. *"Please."*

Dazai eventually had to look away.

Lockhart was still shaking where he stood.

"Good luck, Hero," Dazai said to him.

Lockhart made a sound like a squeak.

With that said, Dazai turned to leave the room. The other students parted for him, an obedient sea. Even the hushed murmers faded as he passed; silence in his wake.

Percy, Blaise, and Draco were still standing together by the door. When he came to them—

Percy nodded stiffly at him. Dazai braced himself for a scolding.

"You..." Percy paused, bit his lip, then haltingly continued, "You need to be more careful." Dazai blinked, shocked. But that seemed to be all Percy had to say, as a moment later he dismissed, "Now get out of here. And try to lay low, please."

Dazai watched him for another short moment before acquiesing.

Immediately, Percy stepped away and rushed to Snape's side across the Hall. Dazai felt the flicker of *Episkey* a moment later.

When Dazai turned back to the door, only Blaise was still there. Draco was no longer at his side, and had evidentally left the Great Hall without a word.

"Hey," Dazai greeted.

"..." Blaise looked him straight on. His frowning demeanor no different from its usual, but there was something strange lingering in his eyes. He glanced over Dazai's shoulder to where Pansy was bent over herself howling, howling, howling.

Dazai's brows pinched. "I've had my fun," he told Blaise. "Let's get out of here."

Blaise met his eye. Then, ever so slowly, he shook his head. *No.*

"I'm going to stay with Pansy," he said. Passive, as if these words were the same as any other. "You go on without me, Dazai."

Without another word, Blaise stepped past Dazai and into the fray. Across the room Dazai couldn't make out what Blaise said to Pansy. But when he kneeled down beside her, Pansy let out a shrieking sob.

Dazai stared.

Something constricted in his stomach.

But everyone was afraid of the Demon Student, and Mori's plan continued to be an uncontended success, so Dazai supposed what he was feeling must be relief.

Chapter End Notes

next up: transfiguration with McGonagall

Needle to Match

Chapter Summary

...not to be confused with 'Match to Needle.'

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was several days when he next saw Pansy face-to-face, but it looked like she hadn't slept in months.

Pansy's eyes were drawn and sad, underlined by dark bags. She seemed to always be frowning. And although Dazai could say with certainty that she had never really smiled at him in the first place, there was no denying that something about her had changed. A weary blanket had settled over her, making her entire being seem limp and dreary. Even her cloak was wrinkled. All week, Dazai had spied her slumped over in her seats and not taking notes.

Though Dazai supposed note-taking would be difficult for Pansy, seeing as dominant arm was wrapped up in a sling.

Dazai had worn casts on all of his limbs before—though never all at once, mercifully. And while he knew it was hardly comfortable, it also didn't warrant Pansy's moping. Dazai thought this, now, watching her from across Great Hall.

After the dramatic resolution to Lockhart's Dueling Club, all future club activities had promptly been cancelled on the spot. And by the next morning, the tables and chairs had all been pushed back in place. Like nothing ever happened. Even Pansy's ice spell had melted from the wall.

Completely clean. Back to normal. Status quo.

Daily life had subdued into the usual grind of classes and slander that Dazai had grown used to at the start of his second year. People continued to give him a wide berth. The Daily Prophet continued to speculate. But an unmistakable tension had come over the entire school. The teachers and students alike all sensed it, and moved from class-to-class with the wariness of a prey animal waiting for something to strike. Dazai felt it too, despite, ostensibly, being the predator in question himself

Evidently sensing eyes on her, Pansy sluggishly lifted her head. She met Dazai's gaze over the other tables, and blinked once.

Dazai did the same. Last time they met eyes like this, Pansy had looked ready to kill him. This time—

Pansy pursed her lips and stared at him through hard eyes. The emotion behind her expression was indescribable. If he were anyone less, Dazai would have shivered to be the focus of such scrutiny.

But he wasn't, so Dazai merely raised a brow.

"Ugh," Ron twitched beside him. "Don't look like that. You're freaking me out."

Dazai watched Pansy for a second longer, before turning his attention to Ron. Given recent events, Dazai had once again decided to forgo the Slytherin table in exchange for the (slightly) more accommodating Gryffindor one. "I'm just looking around," he pouted, "and what do you mean, its *freaking you out?* This is how I always look."

Ron stuffed a ham-and-cheese sandwich in his mouth. A stern look from Hermione had him hastily chewing before continuing, "Like you're up to no good? *Nah.* It's creepy."

Dazai huffed. "Pansy was staring at me," he said, "I'm only returning the favor."

He glanced back to the Slytherin table. Once again, Pansy had her head pointed down to the table. Milli and Tracey kept shooting her concerned looks that went entirely ignored. Blaise was also sitting next to Pansy, but the two of them weren't speaking at all. Dazai wished Blaise had sat with him instead. But ever since the dueling club, Blaise had been hovering more and more over Pansy's sullen shoulder.

Dazai sniffed.

"Well," Hermione said from his other side, "you *did* break her arm. It's understandable she'd be upset with you."

"People get their arms broken all the time. It's hardly worth moping over."

"I guess..." Hermione hesitated. "But not at Hogwarts. With Madam Pomfrey petrified, there's no one here to heal her. Honestly, I didn't even know they *had* muggle things like arm slings on campus!"

Dazai hummed, acquiescing Hermione's point. "About Madam Pomfrey," he said, and Hermione nodded for him to continue, "what do you know about that?"

She blinked. "Just as much as everyone else. Did you hear what Professor Lockhart said at the Club, Dazai?"

"Mm? Wha' happemd?" Ron's question was muffled by the sandwich half-eaten in his mouth.

"Professor Lockhart mentioned a *basilisk,"* she said conspiratorially. "I did a little digging in the library yesterday about basilisks. They have a petrifying vision and can grow to be twice as large as the Great Hall!"

Ron choked. "No way! And there's one here?!"

She nodded. "The way Professor Snape looked at him, I think the whole basilisk thing is supposed to be a secret. So, I did a little more looking around the library. And you'll never guess what!"

"What?" Dazai asked, leaning forward in his seat. The basilisk information he already knew, of course. But otherwise, he'd been too preoccupied with Port Mafia business to really investigate further. And beyond that, he wasn't entirely sure where to look. Though he had half a mind to sneak into the restricted section of the library and try his luck there. Perhaps Hermione had done just that. Thinking this, Dazai asked her.

The tips of Hermione's ears pinked. "I—well—not exactly..." she trailed off, looking away.

Dazai leaned into a palm, smiling smugly. "You totally did."

She puffed out her cheeks, and took a bite of her own cheese sandwich to keep from responding.

"I can't believe you didn't invite me," Dazai moaned. "But don't leave us hanging, Hermione. What did you find?"

It took another several seconds for her to look at him again. When she did, she was frowning apologetically. "Sorry, Dazai. It's just... you've looked so tired lately, I thought maybe I shouldn't bother you? It was only a silly research project, anyway."

Tired?

He looked tired?

Dazai had thought *Pansy* was the dead-looking one among them, but now that he looked closer, Hermione was watching him like she was worried he might keel over at a moment's notice. Though, he supposed he had been feeling a little under the weather ever since Winter Break. He couldn't say exactly why. Maybe it was that Mori's coat felt a bit like a blanket always hung over him like it was lulling him to sleep. Or maybe it was that the coat was heavy enough to be pulling him into the depths of the Earth, never to be seen again.

He ran a hand over his face to smooth out whatever exhaustion Hermione was seeing, regardless. Judging by her lifted brows, however, this was less than successful.

Still, she finally told him, "This Chamber of Secrets business—the basilisk and everything—it's all happened before! Fifty years ago the Chamber was sealed off after a student *died*. Well, the paper I read said an acromantula was responsible, but knowing what we know now, they must have been mistaken. Can you believe it?"

Dazai took in that information with a dull look.

Well, he thought*, Riddle had certainly left that part out of his explanation... but why?*

Hermione fidgeted. "Is that... not helpful?" She asked.

Dazai frowned out of his musings. "Helpful?"

"Well, you said you were going to hunt down the basilisk, didn't you?" Here, she glanced nervously at the staff table, where Lockhart, alongside an uncomfortable looking Hagrid and Trelawney, was gesturing excitedly over his lunch. The cancellation of the dueling club had only seemed to make him more chipper over the last few days. "Not that I approve! Because I absolutely don't, Dazai—you're going to get yourself hurt! But if you're going to do this anyway, I thought you should at least know what to look for."

Dazai blinked.

For once, he wasn't really sure what to say.

Because that was... helpful. And *nice*. And she'd just done it, without him even having to ask? What kind of exchange was that? Or—was this how the Boss felt when his subordinates took it upon themselves to preemptively take action against rival gangs?

...actually, no. If Dazai's subordinates started a gang war without telling him, he'd probably lose his mind. But this was different. Benign.

Ron snorted out a laugh and clapped Dazai on the back. He jerked forward at the force, letting out a *guttural oomph!* that only had Ron laughing harder. "Now *that's* a face you should make more," he teased.

Dazai blinked out of his surprise to shoot Ron a scathing look.

"You know we've got your back," Hermione said. "Although, a little heads up would have been nice." She paused, then asked, "Are you really going to stop the petrifications?"

Dazai bodily shook himself, brushing off how his cheeks had dusted pink at the same time. He nodded. "Think it'll clear my good name?"

"I don't think that's likely, mate."

Dazai deflated outwardly, but internally he knew this outcome was precisely what Mori wanted. "Me neither. Still."

Hermione and Ron shared a glance over his head.

Dazai wiggled his fingers, feeling No Longer Human wriggling through them. He hovered the tips of his nails over his wrist where an old cut was itchy with healing skin, but didn't scratch it.

He glanced up to the staff table.

"About the basilisk, what exactly are you gonna do about it?" Ron asked.

Expectedly, McGonagall wasn't here. It had officially been over a week since Egg's return and Pomfrey's petrification, which meant it was time for Dazai's first remedial lesson with the transfiguration professor. Dazai thought she was probably already in her classroom, preparing for him. If he wanted to get there anywhere near on time, he should start on his way now.

Otherwise, by the time he finally caved and asked a painting for directions, the lesson would already have ended.

That, and it gave him time to talk with Riddle.

Hermione and Ron both followed his gaze.

"Dazai?"

He shook himself and smiled at them.

"I have a plan, don't worry,," he told them simply. Then, without any warning, he promptly stood up. They both starteld at the sudden departure—and so did half the student body, which had apparently been privately watching him for the entirety of the lunch break. He grabbed it bookbag from where it was sprawled carelessly across the tabletop. "Thanks for the info, Hermione. I'll see what I can do with it."

Hermione moved like she, too, was going to stand up. "We can help—"

Dazai lifted a hand to stop her. "Maybe later. I've got a class to get to right now," he also had some more digging to do. Riddle *must* know something. But the diary was, supposedly, safely in Mori's hands right now. Somehow, revealing that he'd never let go of it felt like a betrayal. He couldn't say why.

"Oh," Hermione pipped.

"There he goes, sneaking around again," Ron said idly. He didn't sound offended, though, only that he was stating some obvious fact of nature. Hermione nudged him.

"That's how I roll!" Dazai told them cheerily, and Ron made an exasperated face.

Dazai made a quick goodbye, and no one said anything of the uneaten meal on his plate when he hurried off.

-

Navigating Hogwarts, as ever, was a nightmare at best. But Dazai was lucky to know where most of the secret passages in the school were, so it was only a matter of minutes before he was ducking into a hidden corridor between the Great Hall and one of the revolving staircases. He'd walked quickly through the halls to avoid being spotted by too many people —then faster still when he couldn't quite shake the feeling that he was being followed. But searching around only revealed students glaring at him, or running around corners the second he glanced their way. Damn. Maybe he really was tired.

With the secret stone door shut behind him, Dazai was securely alone, and also about half-way to where he thought McGonagall's office was.

Now, he leaned against the wall and drew Riddle's diary from his coat pocket. From another pocket, he took out a self-inking and black-feathered quill. He flipped open to the first page.

It was empty like always; his and Riddle's last conversation having erased itself days prior. Dazai pressed the nib of his quill to the paper. It bled out from the point of contact.

He wrote in stiff, tiny letters, *'What happened 50 years ago?'*

There was no response for a few seconds. In the meanwhile, Dazai squinted down at his own writing. It was difficult to read in the darkness. And more difficult still with one eye newly blindfolded. There weren't any overhead lights in this passage, only a faint glow from a crack in the stone. Outside, Dazai could scarcely hear the hustle and bustle of Hogwarts. Though whether that was due to the lack of students currently attending, or some sort of muting charm, Dazai wasn't sure.

Dazai turned his focus back to the diary when Riddle's loose script appeared under his own. It took a few moment of screwing up his eyes to make it out in the darkness.

'So your interest in the basilisk has not faded? You are a curious boy, Dazai.'

Dazai scowled down at the page. He explained, *'It can't be a coincidence that you know how to control it. At least tell me how to find it.'* Research about fifty years ago might take some time, but he could do it. Riddle's other information, however, was clearly privileged.

If it were possible, Riddle's handwriting felt smug. *'As I've told you, the basilisk will appear wherever a suitable amount of blood is to be found. If you want to see it so terribly, try killing a small animal.'*

Or cutting your arm open, Dazai though blithely.

'Once its here, I can only sense it through the walls for so long—its too fast to track all the way back to its nest. I need to know where it comes from.'

There was another notable lapse in conversation. This one seemed to go on for far longer than the last one had, and Dazai impatiently affixed and re-affixed the end of his bandages while he waited. When Riddle finally responded, he only wrote one word.

'Sense?'

Dazai's fingers, gloved, ceased their fidgeting. He hovered them over the page instead, and Riddle wrote nothing more. He supposed this was as much confirmation as any that Riddle, despite being some form of magical entity, could not sense No Longer Human like the ghosts, goblins, and Quirrel had. As for Dazai's theory as to why...

'You're a book,' Dazai said, *'you don't get to ask questions.'*

'I suppose I won't answer questions either then, shall I?'

'And find yourself locked in my desk drawer for the rest of all time?'

Another pause. This one lasted for only a few short seconds.

'How about a trade of information, Dazai?'

Dazai tapped the feather against his chest, then wrote, *'You first.'*

'I think not,' Riddle replied easily.

Dazai's eyes narrowed—this time, annoyed rather than squinting against the low light.

Riddle couldn't see this, however, and only continued, *'What confirmation would I have that you would ever respond again? You could take my information and throw me away.'*

'I might still do that now.'

Riddle wrote nothing, and Dazai sighed.

'About as much confirmation I have that you'll answer me honestly.'

'Yes, but what do I have left but to talk with you? I gain nothing from keeping secrets. I am only a diary, after all.'

Dazai huffed. Riddle was unbelievably awful to hold a conversation with. Still...

Dazai supposed, given Riddle's situation as a spirit (or something. Who could ever be sure with this thing?) inhabiting a diary, sharing information with him was probably the least risky thing he could do. After all, Riddle was right. Who else could he even share this information with?

After a moment, Dazai penned, *'My Magical Sensitivity is quite high. Now answer my question.'*

'How high?'

Dazai raised a silent brow. *'High enough,'* he tapped the quill, then decided there was no harm in adding, *'Have you ever seen a Sensing Stone before, Riddle?'*

'I've only read about them, I'm afraid. They're incredibly rare. I take it you've seen one, though,' he wrote. *'What color did you see? Yellow? Paler?'*

'I'll tell you after you tell me about the basilisk,' Dazai offered.

On the page, Quirrell's ink drew a small circle. It was the kind of thoughtless gesture Dazai had seen in other students, when they needed to fill in the next test answer, but weren't sure just what to put. To see it in his sentient diary now gave Dazai pause.

This was a real person (or some equivalent thereof), he was suddenly reminded. A living, real person doomed to sit still forever and ever in the pages of a book. No different than the

painted people of Hogwarts, really. Except that they could at least look around their surroundings, shout obscenities at passerbys, and twitch about in their frames.

Dazai wasn't feeling sympathy for Riddle, necessarily. But there was a coiling discomfort in his gut about the whole situation.

'Very well,' Riddle eventually wrote back. *'Then I will tell y'*

"Woah, fancy book there, Snakey!" George chirped from his left.

"Let's have a peek!" Fred popped up the right.

Dazai slammed Riddle shut so fast his fingers stung.

He stared at the twins, wide-eyed, and they blinked back, looking completely bewildered.

Dazai cleared his throat. He made a point not to put Riddle's diary away but he did hold it firmly to his chest. "You two," he said by way of greeting. "What are you doing here?"

They both lifted a brow, looking perfect mirrors of one another.

"Sneaking around, the usual," they said, "and dodging Perc. That guy is all over the place these days!"

Dazai hummed. Actually, he'd been thinking the same thing about Percy.

Then George made a so-so gesture with one hand, and admitted, "Actually, we were sort of looking for you."

Fred nodded. "There's, *uh,* something we need to talk about."

His eyes—both of their eyes—kept skipping curiously between Dazai's face and the diary. Clearly, they wanted to ask. Dazai said before they could, "It's a little creepy you found me so fast."

The twins laughed awkwardly.

Then, as explanation, Fred withdrew the Marauder's Map from his cloak. He made quick work of unrolling it, and said magic passcode to make the ink appear. A second later, a scale image of the Hogwart's layout appeared on it. Dazai found his name, along with Fred and George's, easily. So they'd found him using this? It certainly wouldn't be the first time. Though—

Two things occurred to Dazai at once.

The first: they had a guest.

Waiting just around the corner, outside the hidden passageway, was printed the name Percy Weasley. He was in the main hall, and thusly couldn't hear their conversation nor see them. But he was here nonetheless.

Was it coincidence that the Gryffindor prefect was loitering nearby? Or something more? Dazai's intuition—and a series of strange events surrounding Percy—had Dazai believing it was more. His eyes narrowed at the name, and he would have dissected that particular concern more if it weren't for his second realization.

This second realization was far more pressing. Dazai focused on that one.

The Marauder's Map showed the twins where everyone in the school was at all times, and they seemed to make a habit of always keeping it on them.

Last week, Dazai had petrified Madam Pomfrey.

...did they..?

When Dazai looked up, he saw it on their faces. The twins knew. They had seem him on the map with Pomfrey just before she turned to stone.

So Dazai did what he always did when backed into a corner. He smiled.

"Like I said, creepy," he leaned away from the map. A tickle of magic was coming off of it. "Are you stalking me?"

"No way!"

"We're just. *Uh."*

Dazai smiled a little wider, sharp and not especially kind. "Like I said, stalking."

They both sputtered, waving their arms about in a frantic gesture.

"No, no, no!" George waved.

"We just like to—y'know—keep on eye on things?"

"Especially you!"

"Since every time we turn out backs, something big is going on!"

They paused, the frazzled energy not leaving them, but certainly mellowing out while they waited for a response.

Now, Dazai *did* put Riddle's diary away. He slipped it into his robe inside pocket, secure, and made a disgruntled face The emotion behind this expression was at least partially genuine. "Right," he said, "That still sounds a bit like stalking, but I'll humor you. What did you want to talk about?"

He already knew. Poppy Pomfrey. But playing the fool had always been his easiest crutch... though whether the twins believed it was something else entirely. They met his eye head-on.

Then, Fred and George nodded in sync. "Okay. Well. Last week."

"After Egg got loose—*how did that happen, by the way?"*

"We were watching you on the map. Just to make sure you didn't get expelled."

"Vanished into the night!" Fred stressed, looking pained. "Like—*poof!"*

George made an exploding gesture with one hand. "Because, you know, we would drop out if you left, Boss."

Dazai blinked. The loyalty strummed a cord in his chest. But he said nothing.

"We would," Fred agreed sincerely. He shook his head a second later, however, and continued seriously, "So. *Uh.* I guess we'll just say it? You're doing that thing again."

Dazai blinked, again, this time more confused than the last. "What."

"That thing where you sneak around and don't talk to anyone."

His nose scrunched up—but only just a little, because he was only really waiting for the twins to finish dancing around the subject.

"We look away for a minute," Fred lifted a brow, "and the next time we talk you're half-way through making a gang and stealing an ancient artifact?"

"I'm not stealing any artifacts at the moment," Dazai assured them. In fact, he had already finished the stealing portion of his school year. The diary now tucked away in his pocket. But that was neither here nor there.

"But you're stopping the petrifications," George butted in. He leaned forward into Dazai's face. "Everyone is talking about what you said at the Dueling Club!"

Fred nodded emphatically. "You didn't tell us about you're plan!"

"Totally not reassuring when you come up out of nowhere with some bonkers plan, Boss."

"The opposite of reassuring."

"Concerning," they said as one.

Dazai squirmed. He really hated it when his friends pulled his heartfelt nonsense with him. He crossed his arms. "You two are as fussy as ever," he grumbled. Then, he squared his shoulders and cut to the chase. "I'm sure you're thinking about that map of yours—the day Pomfrey was petrified, I was there."

Fred and George stilled.

But they fixed themselves not a second later.

"You didn't say anything about it," George said softly. He pulled back, but was still watching Dazai with those worried eyes of his. "We gave you a few days to come to the gang about

what happened, but..."

"But then you didn't," Fred finished.

I didn't tell you, Dazai thought, *because I petrified her.*

He couldn't say this, of course.

"Just being careful," Dazai told them, half-heartedly. "What, did you really want to know I was with Pomfrey when she—" here, he made the same exploding gesutre George had made a minute earlier.

"Ugh," Fred groaned. "He's doing it again, George!"

George grumbled and half-collapsed his entire weight into his brother. "Walking off into danger, and then not telling anyone!"

"Brushing it off like it's nothing!"

"When that's something anyone else would be completely traumatized over!"

They were looking at him like they weren't sure *whether* to coddle him before he broke apart, or slap some sense into him. Both would be completely unbearable.

Dazai huffed, feeling something red and warm dance over his cheeks. "I tell you two plenty."

"Like you tell us about your secret meetings with Blaise and Draco?"

Dazai stiffened.

"Oh, come on, Snakey! We aren't jealous, or anything!" Fred said, and George continued, "But, you know. We really do keep an eye on you. And you've been dodgy ever since the year started"

"Even moreso after Winter Break!" Fred confirmed.

"Which is super concerning, since it's *you."*

"And—"

Dazai groaned, long and loud. It surprised the twins well enough that both their mouths snapped shut audibly. Dazai reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose, then recognized the gesture as one of Snape's mannerisms, and fussed with the bow at his neck instead. He pulled the ribbon taught.

"When I say you're the Pranks and Chaos people, I don't mean making chaos for *me,"* he scolded them, uncomfortable. "And you two are overreacting as always."

"Hey, now."

"I like to think this brand of chaos is nice."

Dazai rolled his eyes, and the bad one twinged beneath its bandage. Then, he decided to take control of this conversation before they could up their fussing to an eleven (because Blaise *always* did that, and Blaise was terrible about it every single time. The last thing he needed was the twins jumping on that bandwagon as well).

"I saw the basilisk petrify Madam Pomfrey," he told them, watching as they both recoiled at the admission. He continued, "when she was looking at my eye. Since she's not a bad person, and Lockhart *is*, I decided to kill the basilisk. Any more questions?"

Fred and George shared a look.

"Yes, actually—"

"So many questions—"

"Great," Dazai clapped, shutting them down before they could even get started. He turned to face the hallway he'd just come down. According to the Marauder's Map, Percy should still be loitering around out there. "I have a class to get to now, so if that's all?"

"It's not!"

"Yeah! I mean, why did you stay behind the infirmary well after Madam Pomfrey was petrified?"

Dazai stepped past them. He had to duck one of Fred's wild hand movements. *If one of you tries to hug me, I'll scream!*

"I was investigating," he said, meaning, *I was cleaning up my own blood.*

"Or, why didn't go Professor Snape with what you saw? He loves you!"

"We're having a fight," Dazai said, walking faster.

"And how come you running away right now—"

Dazai swung open the door and hopped out onto the other side.

"Percy!" he greeted over-enthusiastically. "Long time no see! Let's catch up."

Percy startled horribly. He staggered back several feet, one hand reaching for his wand and the other clutching at his chest. Just a second prior, he'd been standing deflatedly in the middle of an empty hallway, looking around and seeming adrift. Now, he looked about ready to pop.

"Mr. Dazai," he breathed, "you're... looking for me."

"Sure!" Dazai chirped back. He skipped over to the older Weasely, earning him a bewildered stare all the while. It was only after he waved a hand in greeting, that Percy finally looked up and caught sight of Fred and George standing beside a door in the wall that certainly was not there a second earlier. Percy's brows pitched.

"Perc!" They greeted, looking just as stupefied as he did. "Whatcha doing out here?"

Percy surprise very quickly morphed into an expression more befitting a prefect. "I could ask you the same. You two better not be causing trouble." He glanced again to where Dazai was standing beside him. Percy asked alarmingly, "you aren't harrassing Mr. Dazai, are you?"

"Course not!"

"Never the li'l snakey!

"They're peer-pressuring me," Dazai piped up, earning two gaping stares from the twins and a hardened look from Percy.

George shook himself. Then, a little nervously, he told Percy's scowl, *"uh,* we're pressuring him into emotional vulnerability?"

"Yeah! Considering it's Dazai, that's basically free therapy for him!"

Percy's severe stare didn't unharden, but he did look a little more confused than before. Eventually, he turned to Dazai for his side of the story.

Dazai ignored the unspoken prompt. Instead, he told the prefect, "walk me to McGonagall's office, Mr. Prefect Sir."

"Pardon me?"

"I have a class," he said slowly, as though speaking to a small child. Percy's brows furrowed, looking not like he was insulted but instead like he was struggling to make sense of what he was looking at. "I don't know how to get there," he added.

The secret passageway would get him there quicker than Percy could. But if his theory of Percy was right...

Percy eyed him.

"We can walk you," the twins offered.

"You two," Dazai said, giving them each a significant look. He paused, as if to consider his next words. "Are busy talking to Blaise."

They blinked. Percy, beside him, looked vaguely bewildered.

"We are?"

"I mean, the kid is great, but. We are?"

Dazai shrugged. "You want caught up, talk to him," he said, and when both their eyes lit up with realization, he offered the smallest of grins. "Hop to it, Pranks and Chaos."

They stared.

But after a short second, their expression lightened more enthusiastically than the sun. They bounced on the soles of their feet. "Aye aye, cap'n!"

"Great, now only point that chaos where I tell you to!" Dazai reprimanded just as Fred and George ducked back into the secret passage. The door magically fused back into the wall only a second later, leaving only plain-looking brick behind. Dazai cursed. "Those two never behave properly."

Fred was looking between him and the wall dazedly. "I was under the impression you all got along," he said after a moment.

"We do," Dazai said with a nod. "All my awful friends are worrywarts, though. I'm trying to train it out of them."

Percy blinked at him confusedly. Then, he shook himself, and a moment later he had puffed up his chest like the upstanding prefect he was. "Come along then, Mr. Dazai. Professor McGonagall's office is this way."

He took a step in some random direction. Dazai didn't know.

When Dazai followed in place beside him, Percy turned forward and started them down a long corridor. As they walked, Percy frequently glanced his way. As if checking that Dazai was truly following, or trying to dissect what he was thinking about. Definitely, this guy was up to something. If his strangely hovering presence at the Dueling Club hadn't been indication enough, then this surely was.

Dazai cleared his throat after the tenth not-so subvert glance. The noise startled Percy so badly that he actually looked Dazai full-on for once. Then realizing what he'd done, Percy's head snapped back to the far wall.

"Hey," Dazai said, eyeing Percy's expression closely. "Are you stalking me, too?"

Percy gasped.

A second later, his steps stuttered to a sudden halt. He turned to Dazai, slowly, and stared at him with wide, aghast eyes. He coughed out, "What?" Percy blinked. "Wait—*too?"*

Dazai snorted at his expression.

Percy seemed to bodily shake himself. And though he didn't make any effort to start moving down the hall again, he did let out a long breath. "If you feel you are being stalked—"

"By you."

Percy's mouth clamped shut. Then, "I'm. Not stalking you, Mr. Dazai."

"You've been following me," he cut to it, "for awhile now."

The Dueling Club, absolutely. But before that as well. Dazai could easily remember a few times he'd thought for sure he was being followed, only to find no one around. A flash of

ginger hair in the corner of his vision. Or Ron making some off-hand comment, *"Percy. He was asking me about you yesterday!"* The weirdly accommodating way Percy had been treating him ever since Dazai had spirited Ginny away and stolen her diary.

Ginny.

She and Percy were quite close, weren't they?

And at the time, hadn't he even said it? *"Maybe he also noticed Ginny has been acting strange lately?"*

The puzzle pieces collided together with staggering force, but Dazai held his ground.

"You know," Dazai said casually. He started walking again—picking the same direction they'd just been going and hoping it was correct. Percy boggled him for a few seconds before hurrying to take up Dazai's side once more. He felt a small thrill of satisfaction upon having, evidently, chosen the correct direction. "If you want to thank me, you only have to say it. The stalking is a bit much."

Percy choked. He blinked repeatedly at Dazai like he thought the younger boy might have spontaneously gone entirely insane.

"I'm not stalking you, Mr. Dazai."

Dazai's nose curled. "Just call me Dazai. Only the staff call me that."

"Dazai, then," Percy amended a little awkwardly.

He nodded, satisfied.

It took another moment of silent walking before Percy next spoke. Along the way, they past only a few groups of students; most of whom promptly went dead still as if to pretend they were statues. Dazai rolled his eyes every single time. He was only a little surprised to see Percy glaring every time someone recoiled from them.

"Mr.... no. *Dazai,"* Percy eventually said, voice low like he was worried they might be overheard. Dazai adjusted his own demeanor to automatically match. "I do want to thank you."

"Let's hear it then," Dazai puffed up.

Percy only sighed. He looked stressed, Dazai thought. Strange—considering that if anyone here should be at their breaking point, it would be Dazai himself!

"Last semester, I knew something was wrong with Ginny. Only I didn't know what, and she wouldn't say anything about it." He looked away, shame flashing across his expression. "I thought, maybe she's just having a hard time adjusting to Hogwarts? It wasn't until that quidditch game, I started to think..."

Maybe Ginny is involved with the petrifications, Dazai filled in the blanks. He'd realized the same thing, only a bit earlier than Percy had.

He hummed.

"That was when I really knew. I... overheard you and Mr. Zabini talking that day," Percy admitted. He winced apologetically when Dazai's eyes widened at the confirmation of his bubbling theory. *Percy! Percy was the witness!* "Talking about how you thought Ginny was involved. At first, I was so angry you'd come to such a conclusion, that I was going to tell Professor McGonagall you were guilty right away. But then a petrification happened, and you weren't responsible. So I let you go."

Dazai narrowed his eye. "You didn't tell the staff that I suspected Ginny, Mr. Witness."

Again, Percy winced. "...no. It's the only time I've ever hidden something from the staff."

A moment of silence lapsed between them. Then Percy continued.

"You came to the Gryffindor dorms a little after that. Despite what everyone says, my brothers trust you, so I let Ginny go with you." He looked up from where his eyes had fallen to glare into the stone floor. He met Dazai's eye. "You... I don't know what you did. But within a week Ginny was smiling again. She invited Ms. Lovegood over to the dorms, slept in on weekends, read by the fireplace." Percy smiled fondly, his eyes gleaming the light of soft memories. "Whatever you did, thank you."

Dazai shuffled his feet awkwardly. They made a *shff-shff* noise on the stone with every step, and his cheeks heated up despite himself. He looked away. "I didn't do it for her," he grumbled.

Were all Weasley's this awful?!

Dazai needed a break from all of these emotional red-heads! Didn't they know the whole charade would just make him sick? A heartfelt gratitude... *yuck!*

I'm going to make a run for it! Dazai thought. *But—*

...where was McGonagall's office, again?

"I know," Percy said. "And that's fine." He eyed Dazai. "Doing good things for selfish reasons doesn't make you a bad person."

Dazai thought about what Blaise had told him all those months ago. *"I think you should chose to be selfish."* He sniffed, eye still trailing a thin crack in the wall. It wasn't nearly thick enough for the basilisk to peek through. But with a good enough force, it could be. "Yes, well. I'm very selfish," Dazai said firmly, crossing his arms over his chest.

Percy's brows rose, but he shook the expression away a moment later. He sighed. "I'm greatful to what you've done for my family—even if I don't completely understand why you did it—so I'll tell you this: *you need to be more careful, Dazai."*

Dazai looked away from the wall from shoot him a look. "You said that they other day."

"Because I'm hoping you'll heed it."

Now, he was watching Dazai with a look like he was imparting something significant. Dazai didn't know what to make of it.

"I'm plenty careful," he said, puffing out his cheeks.

Percy gave him a dubious look. "Whatever it is you've been up to with the basilisk," he said, dropping his voice somehow lower an octave. Dazai strained to make him out. "The staff are all over it. Professor McGonagall asked me to keep an eye on you, and I know the other prefects were asked to do the same."

Dazai cursed under his breath. "Laying low won't get me anywhere," he told Percy, though the reasoning was mostly for himself, "I'm just going to put an end to the problem."

"Stopping the petrifications. So I hear," Percy said, sounding strained. Clearly, he was recalling Dazai and Lockhart's argument a few days prior. Dazai couldn't blame him—his ears were still ringing just to think about it. He sighed. "Can you not leave this issue to our professors?"

"Nope!"

Percy made a noise Dazai had never heard him make before. A sort of grumbling like a bear, exhausted from heaving its own weight around all day. He planted a hand on his face and rubbed at his eyes. *"Merlin's beard.* You hang around Fred and George too much."

"You think?" Dazai asked, going for cheeky, but sounding very genuine instead.

Around them, the halls turned from unfamiliar, to familiar, to unfamiliar again. Dazai was glad to have a guide.

Percy nodded into his hand. When he eventually dropped his arm, he looked no better off. "Okay. *Okay*. Look, Dazai, I don't think you realize how precarious your situation is right now." Dazai shrugged, and Percy made that bear-like grumbling sound again. It wasn't very prefect-y, Dazai thought. "But I can see there's no talking you out of anything. Just. Be careful. And if you need anything—"

Dazai mimed zipping his mouth shut.

"*Plausible* deniability," he said, thinking about back home in Yokohama, where sometimes you were better off not knowing the details of someone else's assignment. Otherwise, it would blow up in both of your faces.

"What? No." Percy blinked. "You come find me, and I'll help you navigate it safely." He eyed Dazai, looking at once like he wished they'd never had this conversation at all. *"Stars above,* is this how you always operate?"

"I've always got a plan!" Dazai cheerfully told him. Percy didn't look to believe him.

But all the same, Percy nodded. Then, without further word, he suddenly stopped to knock on a door.

Dazai frowned curiously.

"Come in," McGonagall's voice sounded from the other side a moment later.

Percy turned the handle and gestured for a gaping Dazai to go inside.

"This is her office?" Dazai blinked. "I thought it was, like..." he gestured vaguely in a manner that could indicate any number of meanings. Percy lifted a brow. "Not here," Dazai finished lamely. He dropped his hand to his side.

Percy gave him an odd look. "Do you really struggle with navigation this much? I thought the twins were joking." Dazai pouted, and Percy only continued to stare at him. Eventually, Dazai decided to grin cheerily at him before promptly slamming the door in his face.

He heard a shocked grunt a second later, but Dazai paid it no heed. He whirled around.

McGonagall was standing beside her desk. She looked as though she was just about to get up to greet them at the door, before Dazai had slammed Percy out. She hand one hand braced on the desk and the other in the air. Now, she watched him, a little bewildered. A moment later, though, her eyes narrowed in thought. It had Dazai immediately on edge.

She knows about Port Mafia, he reminded himself silently. He prepared himself for an interrogation.

But after several seconds of silent staring, McGonagall did no such thing. She sat back down and gestured for Dazai to do the same.

Just like in his lessons with Snape, there was a single chair set up opposite the professor's desk. Dazai settled in it. His coat puffed up around his waist. He put his bookbag on the floor beside him, all the while not taking his eye off of McGonagall.

He looked around.

McGonagall's office was a touch neater than Snape's. There were still plenty of books and papers spread throughout the room, but not so haphazardly. Diagrams indicating various transfiguration matrices were posted on the walls, or folded up and sitting in a bookshelf. Curiously, Dazai noticed several clumps of black fur in the corners of the room. As though some furry animal frequently took up residence here. Dazai wracked his brains to recall if McGonagall had a pet, but came up short. Regardless, it tickled his nose uncomfortably.

Besides that, a single, steaming cup of what smelled like coffee was on the desk. Dazai eyed it with some displeasure. Wasn't he going to get a cup, too? Snape always made him tea.

"Transfiguration," McGonagall said suddenly, drawing Dazai's wandering gaze back to her. She was frowning at him sternly, apparently disproving of his snooping. "The transformation of one matter into another. You should remember this from class."

He blinked. So she wasn't going to mention Port Mafia?

Dazai rolled his shoulders, and hid a satisfied smirk behind something more teasing. She had accepted his deal, after all! The basilisk for her silence! Thank goodness. Dazai didn't want to have to mastermind another petrification so soon. What a hassle that had been!

McGonagall's stare drilled into him.

Right.

"I've read a few books," Dazai said. She lifted a brow, clearly not missing the way he'd not really answered her prompt. "And Hermione lectured at me for a few hours about the wandwork."

McGonagall nodded. She didn't look satisfied, but she didn't look *unsatisfied*, either. One on one like this, she was actually kind of difficult to read. Then, with one hand, she withdrew a match from a small box on her desk.

Dazai groaned audibly when she set it in the blank space between them.

McGonagall eyed him sharply. "Match to needle," she began, and Dazai whined again, "one of the simplest transfigurations, due to the objects' already similar qualities. You've seen this cast before many times. Cast it yourself now."

Dazai pulled out his wand obligingly, but made a show of it. He slowly dragged his hand through his bag. Idled with the wand for a bit. Twirled it lazily between his fingers. And by the time he actually got around to looking at the match again, nearly a minute had past of him grumpily getting to it. All the while, McGonagall said nothing. She only waited with seemingly endless patience for him to wield the wand properly.

Dazai aimed his wand at the match. The tiny splinters popping out of it seemed to mock him. "This is useless, you know," Dazai told her, "this spell is the bane of my existence."

"Try it," she told him, nonplussed. "I will be able to see what you are doing wrong, and guide you appropriately."

"Snape said I did it just fine."

"Professor Snape is not an expert in transfiguration," she countered.

Dazai snorted, recalling his final lesson with Snape. "Don't tell *him* that."

Rather than respond, McGonagall tapped the desk twice. Just beside her finger, the match sat and did nothing. Dazai glared at it. Match to Needle was quickly becoming his least favorite spell—sitting right beside *Verdimillious* for how useless it was, and *Motus Subtilis* for the hundred-something times Snape had made him cast it before moving their lessons forward.

Might as well get this over with.

Dazai gave his wand a proper wave, and channeled all his focus into how transfiguration spells always felt for him.

Predictably, nothing happened.

He looked back to McGonagall to ask her what he was doing wrong, only to find her watching him strangely.

"What?" He asked, drawing his wand back defensively.

She said nothing for a long moment. Her expression kept narrowing, then searching over his wand, the match. Whatever McGonagall was thinking, she was obviously deeply considering it. For a split second, Dazai's mind traitorously suggested that she was finally going to snap and say something about Port Mafia.

But she didn't.

McGonagall hummed. "Once more."

Now it was Dazai's turn to make a face. He tried again, anyway, once more shaping the magic and watching it do exactly nothing. The match didn't even shift its position. Dazai thought he might hate matches, actually.

"...interesting," was all she said.

Dazai set his wand down, the useless thing.

McGonagall continued unbothered, her eyes only flicking over to clock the movement before turning again to watch Dazai. "By all accounts, the cast itself was perfect." She tilted her head. "What were you thinking about?"

Dazai glowered. "I already did this part with Snape. I'm focused on the right thing."

"You are a student, you do not know what the *right thing* is," she sternly reminded him. Dazai shrugged. "You studied your matrices?" she asked.

When Dazai nodded, McGonagall picked up the match. She twirled it between her fingers.

After a few moments of silent consideration had past, McGonagall said, "Severus told me you had improved considerably with your magic."

Dazai bristled. "It's just transfiguration that's not working."

She hummed. It was strange—McGonagall had an uncompromising demeanor, but she never seemed harsh. Stating an observation, then considering it before moving forward. Dazai supposed Snape had a similar methodology, albeit with considerably more glaring and sniping at one another. On the reverse of that, Mori's lessons tended to involve smiles, and father's his fists.

After a pause, McGonagall very suddenly said, "Invia Obice."

Dazai blinked. No magic rose up around McGonagall, and no shimmering, blue wall formed between them. She hadn't channeled any magic into the spell. This gave Dazai some pause. He looked at McGonagall curiously.

She continued, "I hear you cast that spell the other day."

He nodded, stupefied as to where this was going. "But that's a charm, not a transfiguration."

"True," she said. "It is also not a spell taught to students. Why did Severus teach it to you?"

Dazai tilted his head. Was she trying to glean something from Snape's teaching style? If so, this was a poor question. "He didn't."

McGonagall frowned. "You couldn't have learned such a spell from a book alone," she poked him with a severe stare.

"I learned it from you, Ma'am."

A beat of silence past.

McGonagall's eyes widened, then narrowed noticeably. "When would I have—" she blinked. And again, that wide-eyed astonishment colored her mien. "Mrs. Norris."

Dazai snapped his fingers, glad to be on the same page. "It seemed useful to know a defensive spell, so I decided to copy it. Good thing, too. I think Pansy was planning to burn this whole place down."

"You practiced a high-level spell without a mentor based on only one example?" She asked, this time stern in a way that told Dazai he'd probably broken some unspoken rule of wizardry —*don't steal other people's spells.* Noted.

"I didn't practice," Dazai told her. "It was just the only defensive spell I could think of."

Again, a moment of silence.

McGonagall's mouth dropped open.

By this point, McGonagall's shock had turned to scolding had turned back to shock—into outright awe. She almost looked impressed, Dazai thought. "You mean to say that was the first time you cast Invia Obice? Perfectly? In the heat of a duel?"

Dazai shifted in his seat. The praise might have had him preening if it weren't underlined by the ever obvious *you definitely should not be able to do that!* A phenomenon that always had Dazai feeling like he needed to backpedal. So backpedal he did.

"Well, Professor McGonagall just makes *suuuch* a good teacher, I learnt it on the spot!"

"It is a high level spell," she said. "How?"

Dazai didn't let his emotions show on his face, but he was a little peeved to find out that McGonagall couldn't be distracted in the same ways Snape could. A drawling voice and a few irritating words was usually enough for the potions master. And if not, Dazai could always just start bold-face lying with him. McGonagall, however, had a severe look about her like she couldn't be shaken off. Even her posture was exact.

"Are you sure it's high level?" Dazai asked cheekily. "It seemed pretty simple to me."

McGonagall frowned. Something like reconsideration flashed over her expression, though she said nothing of it. She tapped the match against the desk. It made the barest of sounds. Then, she waved her hand in an alluring gesture over it. Dazai felt the magic in the slight undulation of her fingers. A wave rolling to shore, then back out to sea.

Before his eye, the match elongated, thinned, and turned a shiny silver. One end sharped to a point, and the red head bulged out to form the needle's eye. Dazai leaned forward to watch. The transformation and the way the magic rolled was captivating. Sitting before him was undoubtedly a perfectly formed sewing needle.

After a few moments, the match—or, it was a needle now, he supposed; though the acutal logistics of one thing becoming another entirely was a little difficult to wrap his head around—remained further unchanged. Dazai looked up to find McGonagall was watching him curiously.

He cleared his throat and fell back into his chair. It was wooden, and looking a little worse-for-wear, so it creaked at his weight. "You didn't use a wand," he thought aloud.

She agreed with a stiff nod. "As an expert, and a teacher of this particular spell for many years now, I no longer need one for minor transfigurations."

"You always use one in class," Dazai said.

"Students will be using wands. Therefore, a wanded example is best."

Dazai hummed. That made sense. Although...

"But not for me?"

She inclined her head, eyes briefly flicking to a complicated-looking poster about transfiguration theory before shifting back to Dazai. Then, she sighed. "Severus was right. You *are* a curious one, Mr. Dazai." At Dazai's asking—and honestly a little offended—look, McGonagall continued, "You seem to be capable of great things, and yet simple spells trip you up. Why is that?"

No Longer Human buzzed idly in his brain. "No clue," Dazai lied.

"Neither have I any," McGonagall said with a scrutinizing look Dazai's way. He smiled—the picture of innocence—and she huffed out what could have been a laugh or a sigh. But then she looked away. "And we won't know, until..."

McGonagall trailed off, but Dazai caught her meaning well enough.

Until Pomfrey is cured.

Dazai couldn't tell her that Pomfrey would never be cured. Not if he had his way. He only smiled thinly.

She shook herself. "Regardless. An unusual student requires unusual methods. Let us try this: we will break the transfiguration process down into individual steps. From there, we will conclude exactly where the issue lies and proceed accordingly."

Dazai nodded. That sounded reasonable.

McGonagall pulled a new match out from the box.

Dazai made a noise like he'd been stabbed. She shot him a quelling look, and Dazai whined, "can't we at least do something else? Like button-to-beetle! Hermione told me about that one."

"It's beetle-to-button. And I should hope you learned about that spell during *class*, Mr. Dazai."

"Oh. Sure, that too."

"The transfiguration of living beings is infinitely more complex," she indicated to the match and needle both. "Charms may come easy to you, but for this subject, we will stick to the basics."

"Hermione said beetle-to-button is a beginner spell."

"Ms. Granger is passing her class. You are not."

"Worth a shot..." Dazai grumbled. He glared at the match like it was his sworn enemy. Then, he imagined his *actual* sworn enemy's gleaming face in the eye of the needle, and hated that one more. Lockhart was the worst.

McGonagall tapped the table again—this time with more force, as if to say, *pay attention.* "We will start with something simple," she said. "Elongate the matchstick."

Dazai looked between the match and McGonagall's transfigured needle. Sure enough, the needle was a bit longer. He raised his wand and gestured it at the correct angle. Then, he *channeled* his magic into that *rolling, revolving* feel transfiguration was supposed to take. And willed it, *be longer, be longer, be longer!*

It didn't get longer.

The stupid match was just as stupid and small as any other match, except for McGonagall's match, which was currently a needle.

At his blank look, McGonagall merely said, "Make it sharper."

Dazai ground his teeth and did just that. Or, he *tried* to do just that.

"Turn it silver."

Dazai did not.

"Form the eye."

Dazai set his wand down and leaned back into his seat. He folded his arms over his chest. Across the desk, McGonagall lifted a single brow. The match was completely unchanged. "This is useless," Dazai said.

McGonagall's expression sharpened into disaproval. "Giving up after the first attempt is not conducive to growth. I had thought by this point you would understand this, Mr. Dazai."

Dazai squirmed. "I knew I'd figure those other spells out eventually, though," he argued. Transfiguration was just different. He didn't know how, but it was. "Who wants a pointy, silver match, anyway? Can I get an exemption for Transfiguration?"

McGonagall only continued to eye him, clearly discontent with him. Her eyes narrowed, and she tapped her fingers along the desk in a random rhythm. Dazai watched her right back. He didn't like the way it looked like she was dissecting his every thought. It wasn't as dangerous a look as Mori's, but it was uncomfortable all the same. Dazai wasn't sure whether she made him want to try twice as hard so she'd back off, or give up twice as fast until she got sick of him. Either way, the match wasn't going to be turning into a needle any time soon.

Eventually, the tapping stopped.

She dragged her finger along the table, until a short, unpainted nail was pointing at the needle. Dazai frowned, unsure where she was going with this.

"Mr. Dazai, please return this item to its original form."

Dazai blinked. He looked down at the needle, then back to McGonagall just as fast. "And ruin all your hard work?"

She only tapped the table again.

"...right," he said. Guess there was no getting around it. Dazai picked up his wand again.

He waved the wand, and imagined strongly in his mind how the match used to look. Short, fat, and where the eye was now there had before been a red swell on the one end. It was supposed to be a snappable wood, rather than the slick silver it wore now. Dazai saw this image so perfectly in his mind, he almost thought he could touch it.

The match as it should be.

The match as it *was.*

Dazai stared down, transfixed, as the needle did just as he'd envisioned. It shrunk and dulled and popped out a little red tumor for fire-making. Even the shiny silver had dried up into a pale wood. He could see the grains in its make from here, and looking closer revealed the

same tiny splinters coming off it that he remembered from before. A match. A match-to-needle-to match! He'd transfigured something! And his head didn't even hurt!

"Wow," Dazai said. And although his words were biting and insincere, he couldn't shake the twist of genuine surprise in them. "I turned your match back into a match. How useful."

But still—*he'd done it!*

Only, Dazai didn't exactly know what he'd done differently. The spell felt the same as it always did, and he'd moved his wand in precisely the same manner. The only change was that it had actually worked.

McGonagall lifted the match-needle-match from the desk and rolled it around in her fingers, inspecting. There was something appraising in her expression that Dazai naturally disliked. She ran her nail along the edge of the match, and one of the splinters flew off with a nearly inaudible *snap!* But there was no denying that it was indeed a match once again.

Thoughtfully, Dazai looked to his wand hand.

"Now," she said, setting to down once more, "a needle."

Dazai nodded, feeling more confident now. He did exactly what he'd done the last time—envisioned the needle perfectly in his mind, how it looked and might have felt under his hand. The magic turned, and—

Nothing.

...nothing?!

Dazai tried again—and again—to no effect.

He scowled down at it.

What the hell! How come?

"I suspect," McGonagall said suddenly, drawing Dazai's smoldering attention back to her, "that I know the root of your dilemma."

Dazai grumbled down at his wand, "What is it?"

She plucked the match off the desk, forcing Dazai to cease his glaring at it. When they met eyes, he forced his expression to soften a little. Ever-so-slightly not as disrespectful.

"You have a mental block."

Okay. Now Dazai was lost again. His face must have betrayed this thought.

"The fundamentals of your casts are perfect, and you clearly have the necessary focus. Severus tells me you're actually quite smart, so I'll assume for now you understand your matrices well enough," this was accompanied by a pointed look. "Now, it isn't particularly

common, but some young wizards can struggle with magical aspects outside of those functions."

Dazai frowned, waiting for her to continue.

She collected both matches from the desk. And with quiet, precise hands, slipped them back into the match box. Dazai watched all this impatiently.

"Like what?" What was so special about transfiguration?

"A mental block," she said again. "You aren't able to properly conceptualize the processes behind a transfiguration. This is more common with young wizards who are muggle-born, and tend to be very logical thinkers. *A match is not a needle, and magic cannot change this fundamental fact*—is what these types of people may think. Hence why you can magic the needle back into its original form, but cannot turn the match into something it is not. For some, the illogical nature of transfiguration seems insurmountable. Would you say this describes you, Mr. Dazai?"

Logic was one of Mori's favorite words to throw at him. He shrugged.

McGonagall nodded as though he'd answered yes. "Transfiguration is different from other magics. It is not the shaping of magic, or the balancing of potions. It is the base alteration of the world itself. One thing into another. Do you understand?"

"I get it," Dazai replied, a little petulantly. He could spit the textbook verbatim back to her, and he still wouldn't know what he was doing wrong.

She sat up, and Dazai got the feeling that they were done for the day. Her next words confirmed this. "Your homework for this lesson," she said. Already, she was drawing a stack of ungraded year-five essays to the blank spot in front of her. A wave of her hand summoned a self-inking quill. "Meditate on the subject of transfiguration. Try to relate the subject to something you personally experience or understand. This is the basis for lifting your block."

Something he personally understands..?

Dazai suddenly recalled his early lessons with Snape—how realizing *motus subtilis* was similar to Mori's scalpels had helped him to make sense of the example-less spell. Still...

If motus subtilis is a scalpel, then...

...transfiguration is just stupid!

"We will meet again in two weeks," McGonagall said, oblivious to Dazai's growing annoyance.

He blinked. "Two weeks?" Snape and he had met every week like clockwork.

She didn't look up from her essays, only marking something down with red ink beside a crudely drawn matrix. "I am far too busy with my other obligations to meet every week. So use this time wisely."

Dazai sat there for a moment longer, before McGonagall dismissed him. He gathered his things and exited at a leisurely pace that would have driven Snape mad. When he left, the halls were quiet and still.

Transfiguration. The transformation of one thing into another.

But for all Dazai thought on it, he came up short.

After all, whether he was wearing Hogwart's robes or Mori's coat, he was still the same underneath.

A demon.

And no transfiguration could fix him of that

Chapter End Notes

next up: healing Pansy's broken arm.

Dazai Doesn't Get Murdered

Chapter Summary

I still don't know a thing about chess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Uh, a letter from Hogwarts just came for you, Professor."

Professor Helbert Spleen took the letter distractedly, never once glancing up from the paper sprawled out before him. He'd been scowling down at it for several minutes now—long enough that Wiggins had started to worry for his health. As a healer at St. Mungo's, Spleen could really be getting sick from all sorts of sources. Just last week, a pair of wizards had come in with something dreadfully contagious, involving boils and blood and vomit that Wiggins had had to clean up.

She worried her hands nervously while he read.

"Professor, Sir, Spleen, *uh—"*

"Spit it out, Wiggins," he grumbled, still not even bothering to look up at his apprentice.

"You don't have any boils, do you?"

Please let it not be something involving vomit. Wiggins had enough of that for one lifetime, thank you.

Finally, Spleen turned away from his pages. He gave her a look like she was deranged, and she fidgeted. "What?" He shook his head. "Nevermind you. Look at this!"

Wiggins bent forward, over Spleen's neatly kept desk, where a newly printed Daily Prophet article was face-up. She frowned down at the header. Spleen stabbed his finger into it angrily. *"'DOE taking preliminary steps to remove headmaster...'"* she trailed off. *"Oh.* There really going to fire Headmaster Dumbledore? I'm not surprised."

"No, no!" Spleen stabbed the paper harder. Wiggins wondered if he might poke a hole in it like that. "My article! They've moved it to the second page!"

"Second page isn't bad."

"It was meant to be page one."

"Well," Wiggins said, then seeing the way he was still drilling into the paper, took a notable step away before continuing, "You know. Ever since the Demon Student started petrifying people, he's had the first page." The Demon Student, or this Department of Education. But really, the stories were one in the same. Wiggins just wondered when DOE was going to get around to removing the Demon itself.

Spleen stabbed the page again, then winced. He blew out a breath and folded his fingers in a very deliberate-looking arch. "And damn the boy for it," he cursed.

They lapsed into an uncomfortable silence.

Usually, this was the part where Wiggins quietly shuffled out of the room, trying not to trip on any of Spleen's fancy medical artifacts on the way out. Today, she shifted nervously from foot-to-foot. Spleen, absorbed in his article, only noticed a few minutes later.

He blinked at her. "What are you still doing here? Don't you have patients to see?"

Yes, she did. But mercifully none covered in their own bile.

Wiggins' eyes flicked to the letter, then back to her mentor. He still hadn't opened it.

"Sometime today, Wiggins."

"That letter," she blurted. "It's from Hogwarts."

He glanced to the letter, confirming this. Then he lifted an unamused brow. "It is."

"Well, what do they want?"

Spleen's frown lines had frown lines. "I haven't opened it, now have I?"

Wiggins winced at the harsh tone—used to it by now, but still disliking it. Regardless, Spleen evidently was curious as well. Hogwarts hardly sent letter to St. Mungo's unless it was an emergency, or something deeply interesting.

Interesting, like that magically sensitive student they had over there.

Matron Pomfrey had written them only a few times about the students, and they'd written back at least a two-dozen letters back. Apparently, the child could see white in the Sensing Stone they'd lent Hogwarts. *White!* Spleen had nearly spat his coffee out upon reading that! Which had made Wiggins laugh until he'd turned that usual scowl onto her.

That said, Spleen had then rather excitedly started drafting a letter back. He wanted to meet the child. He wanted to study the child.

Mostly, he wanted to write a Daily Prophet article about the child. Wiggins wanted to co-author it, and then maybe get a job at the Daily Prophet instead. She doubted *they* ever had to clean up bile.

Spleen cast a quiet spell to tear the seal on his letter. He unfolded it with wrinkled hands, then squinted down at the paper for several seconds before shifting the glasses on his nose. He read in silence. Wiggins waited.

His lips quirked into an odd shape. Happy? Or angry? The longer he read, the stranger his expression got, and Wiggins strained to make sense of it.

"What?" She asked. "What is it? Did Matron Pomfrey's petrification-cure potion not work, and she can't be fixed yet?"

Spleen read for a few moments longer, leaving Wiggin's terribly on the edge.

When he finally looked up from his letter—set it down with a neat little press—there was a perturbing glint in his eyes. And the curve of his lips was a curling smile. "Pomfrey's cure is not complete yet," he said at length.

Wiggins frowned. She didn't see how this was good news at all. "They want St. Mungo's to make one for them? It will take a while."

"More than that," he said. "Dumbledore wants St. Mungo's to send a healer to Hogwarts. A temporary matron to keep the school in check. Apparently, only a few days after Pomfrey was put out of commission, a couple of students got into a nasty brawl. Punks."

Wiggins blinked as that information washed over her. She mentally tallied the other staff—who they could spare for the next several months. But Spleen was still making that giddy expression that had Wiggins thinking he was onto something else entirely. "Who will we send, Sir?" She asked, a little cautiously.

"Don't you see, stupid girl?" Spleen stabbed the Daily Prophet article again twice over. "I will go!"

"You?! But we can't spare *you,"* she startled. "We have patients in critical that need—"

"The articles!" Spleen was continuing, as if Wiggins had never spoken at all. "That magically sensitive child they have, I can sus them out for an article. Or," *stab, stab, stab!* on the paper, "that Demon Student is at Hogwarts! I'll interview him myself. Have the front page for *weeks!"*

Cold dread washed over Wiggins. "You want to talk with that demon? Do you have a death wish?!"

"Nonsense!"

"Wha—"

"And you will be coming with me, of course," Spleen spoke over Wiggins' stuttering. "While I'm doing my articles, you'll need to be finishing Pomfrey's potion. Seeing to the students. All that."

Cleaning up vomit, Wiggins heard.

Then, what Spleen said really occurred to her, and she stammered, "H-hold on, I don't want to meet the Demon Student!"

"But imagine the publicity!" Spleen cried.

"Wh-what are you even going to write about the Demon?" Wiggins sputtered. "You write *medical* articles, not *political* ones!"

"Who cares the subject, so long as my name is on it!"

Spleen was standing within the second, his usually creaking bones apparently not bothered now that something interesting was afoot. He hurried around the room, gathering up papers and his doctor's bag and several potions they'd been brewing. Spleen worked at a dizzying pace. All Wiggins could do was stare, aghast, as her mentor began throwing things into his bag.

Vials *click-clacked.*

"Well, what are you waiting for?" He barked at her, head sticking into a slowly-brewing cauldron. Pink vapors fogged over his glasses, but he didn't seem to even notice. He grinned with yellowed teeth. "We're going to meet the Demon Student!"

-

Dazai and Hermione were the only two occupants of the Hogwarts library, if one didn't count the Madam Pince, which Dazai did not. Between them were almost a dozen tomes of varying colors and subjects. Some were left open, and others untouched. Dazai, pressed into the corner tightly, currently favored a book about snakes. It was folded open and held close to his face. Across the table, Hermione read a book on transfiguration.

"Is there anything useful in that one, Dazai?" Hermione asked. As always when asked a question about reading, her voice had a bubbly kind of excitement to it.

Dazai didn't look up from his book when he nodded.

Or should he say—*books.*

Though he was pretending to read *Snakes of All Sizes, Shapes, and Magicks,* Dazai's focus was actually on the much smaller and thinner book he'd hidden behind it.

Riddle's diary.

Why rely on the library's books, when he had a first-hand account right here?

Their conversation sprawled out before him in dark ink and slowly vanished itself the longer they talked. Still remaining on the page, was:

'On the second floor, within the girl's bathroom, you will find that which you seek.'

Dazai had skeptically written back, *'The basilisk lives there?'*

'Thereabouts.'

'Why?'

Riddle had hesitated for a while before answering this. And then, he hadn't actually answered it at all, and only asked instead, *'How sensitive to magic are you, Dazai?'*

'Don't change the subject.'

'This was our deal, no?'

It was. Information about the basilisk in exchange for Dazai telling about the Sensing Stone. He explained to Riddle how he'd seen white, and how Pomfrey and Snape had looked shocked to find out. How apparently, the Merlin was the only other person able to make such a claim.

Then, because Dazai was curious and he knew Riddle could betray this to no one, he had written, *'I saw black, too.'*

'Black?' Riddle had written after a moment.

Dazai silently cursed the diary for being just that—a diary. Without a face or tone to go along with Riddle's question, Dazai had no way of knowing just what he was thinking. Riddle's handwriting looked as dark and curling as ever.

'Behind the white,' he'd written, then trying to envision the Sensing Stone again, added, *'or mixing with it.'* There had been another long pause, during which Dazai's own writing took up another blank line on the page. *'Does that mean something to you, Riddle?'*

'No,' eventually came the answer. Immediately after this, Riddle wrote, *'There is a hidden entrance to the Chamber of Secrets in the second floor girl's bathroom. You will not be able to open it, but it may still provide you the answers you seek.'*

At the nonsequiter, Dazai had penned, *'How terribly nondescript of you. Have you ever considered actually telling me something straight?'*

To which Riddle had said nothing at all.

He had sighed, long and aggrieved, drawing an odd look from Hermione across the table. Hence her current attention.

Finally, Dazai looked away from Riddle. His silence gave away nothing, but Dazai supposed *second floor girl's bathroom* was enough of a lead. For now. He'd pester Riddle more, later,

just for fun.

"I have a lead on the basilisk's location," Dazai told Hermione after a few moments. Meanwhile, Riddle's diary slowly erased itself until only a blank sheet remained.

"Oh! What does the book say about it?" Hermione asked, sitting upright and trying to peek at Dazai's book.

He pulled it closer to his chest. "Nothing. It just got me thinking."

She deflated.

"The second floor bathrooms—where are those?" he asked.

Hermione blinked many times. "Dazai, if you need the restroom, there's one much closer just over—"

"No, no, its about the basilisk!"

"The basilisk... is in a bathroom?"

Dazai shrugged. "Like I said, it's just a lead I'm following. We'll see if it pans out," he said. And though Riddle had no way of overhearing his conversation with Hermione, he still gave the diary a forceful stab of his finger, thinking, *if this doesn't work out, I'll burn you.*

Hermione continued to stare at him, somewhere between skeptical and thoughtful. She mouthed *bathroom* to herself a few times over. Dazai waited for her to work through her thoughts, wondering if she might already know what sort of nonsense Riddle had been on about.

Then suddenly, she gasped, "The girl's bathroom!"

Dazai jumped. "Yeah, that one."

"Dazai, you're a genius!"

"I am?" He blinked. "Wait. Of course I am."

She shot him a strange look, then shook her head. "The girl's bathroom on the second floor has been closed down *forever*. No one is allowed in." Hermione bounced in her seat. "You think the basilisk might have something to do with that?"

"I do now," Dazai said, leaning forward in interest. "What else do you know about it?"

Hermione's excitement was short-lived. She deflated self-consciously. "Sorry, that's all I know. Unlike *some* of us, I stay away from places I'm forbidden from."

Dazai lifted an intentional brow. "That's absolutely not true. Just last year, we—"

"N-not so loud!"

Dazai fell back with a laugh. Hermione's eyes snapped to Madam Pince—who hadn't once even glanced their way—then back to him.

"A-anyway!" Hermione squeaked, narrowing a glare onto him. She shoved her own textbook forward—*Transfiguration and You!*—for Dazai to read. "Look what I found. It really is just how Professor McGonagall told you, Dazai. Sometimes, muggle-born wizards struggle with transfiguration more than their other subjects."

Dazai skimmed the page obligingly. It revealed nothing he didn't know already.

He shut his own book, finished with it, and smuggled away Riddle in the same motion. Then, he slumped into his seat. "Well, that's because it's stupid. If I want a match, I'll buy a match. And if I want a button, there's no way I'm going beetle hunting first."

Hermione puffed, agitated. "I told you, Dazai, those spells are for practicing the fundamentals."

He stuck his tongue out, and she stuck her's out right back.

A few seconds of silence passed between them.

They abruptly dissolved into giggles.

After a few moment of laughing, Dazai sniffed to clear the giddiness from his lungs. "McGonagall said I should find a way to relate to transfiguration," he said, "Hermione is a muggle-born, too. So how do you relate to it?"

Hermione hummed. She reached up to stroke her chin, as though she had some grand, old beard there to ponder over. Her nose scrunched up. "I guess... the teachers all say this is how it works," she brushed a finger over the textbook, "so it must work like this, right?"

"You're such a brown-noser, Hermione."

"The professors wouldn't lie to us!"

"Blah, you're no help," Dazai grumbled. Maybe Hermione could relate to transfiguration through the power of blind authority-worship, but not Dazai.

Now that he'd had time to think on it, perhaps it was a good thing McGonagall could only meet every other week. Several days had already passed, and Dazai had made precisely no ground on his homework assignment from her. He'd need all the time he could get at this rate. ...or maybe he could just blow this assignment off like he did all his others.

Dazai sighed.

Well. One thing at a time, he supposed. Taking care of the basilisk was his end of an unspoken deal with McGonagall. Surely she would appreciate his taking care of that before less important things like homework. Mori might appreciate it, too. Though his last letter had hardly suggested anything of the sort, reading only a succinct, *'Good job,'* followed by some more of his typical, crooning garbage.

Before Dazai could settle his own thoughts, a familiar voice suddenly called across the library.

"Miss Granger," Percy said, walking across the library at a hurrying pace. "Have you seen—*oh!* Dazai, there you are."

Dazai perked up, and gave a small wave.

Hermione looked between them a little strangely. "I didn't realize you two were so close."

Dazai shrugged—the more casual version of Percy's wide-eyed gesturing.

"It—I'm just looking out for him," Percy stumbled.

"He wants to join the gang," Dazai told Hermione shrewdly.

"He does?"

"The *what?!"*

Dazai cleared his throat. He cast a wayward glance to Madam Pince, just as Hermione had moments earlier. But once again, she didn't seem to even notice them. Dazai was starting to think that she'd given up on her usual fanfare. Perhaps it had something to do with how few students were attending Hogwarts right now. Or maybe it was because only Dazai and his friends even came to the library anymore. Either way, Pince didn't appear bothered even if they shouted.

"You were looking for me?" Dazai asked instead, "What for?"

Percy blinked, steadying himself. He promptly straightened up, expression sobering. And when he squared his shoulders up, he actually sort of looked like a prefect. Seeing the change, Dazai tensed like he was awaiting a blow. *What now?*

"Dazai," Percy said, "your presence has been requested in the infirmary. Knowing you, I offered to escort you myself."

Dazai blinked. Across from him, he saw Hermione doing the same.

"The infirmary?" Hermione startled. "What for?"

Something like dread flicked at Dazai's chest. He fought to keep it from showing on his face. "I thought Pomfrey was petrified," he said warily.

Had she gotten better? How?

Because if Pomfrey had recovered... Told everyone about what he was, and what he'd done? Mori's plan foiled by a single mistake—

Dazai shook himself. That was impossible!

Percy froze, then melted a second later. He shook his head solemnly, and Dazai breathed out an inaudible sigh of relief. "I'm... afraid Madam Pomfrey is still unwell. I meant the new healers want to see you. After your duel with Miss Parkinson, it's no wonder."

Hermione and Dazai shared a brief, questioning look. Then, Hermione asked, "New healers?"

"They only just arrived today," he told them, evidently reading the confusion in their faces. "Headmaster Dumbledore didn't make an announcement over breakfast, because he wasn't sure when St. Mungo's would be able to send someone over. They must not be busy over there; it was only two hours after the letter was sent that they arrived!"

"Pomfrey's replacements, huh?"

"Temporarily," Percy stressed. "Until they can finish the petrification cure and Madam Pomfrey can be reinstated."

Dazai said nothing.

Percy swallowed. He was frowning down at Dazai, apparently reading some unpleasant emotion in his expression. "There's no need to worry. We can trust in St. Mungo's to take care of everything," he tried to console, falsely assuming Dazai's discomfort was in concern for Pomfrey, and not in fact for himself.

Dazai couldn't have Percy worrying about him like that, so he pasted a toothy smile on. He pivoted. "Well, you tell these new healers that I didn't get hurt in the duel. There's no need to bother with me."

Hermione and Percy both made faces—each for very different reasons.

"Right! Even though he got in close, Dazai wasn't hit with a single spell!" A little frantic, Hermione jumped to Dazai's defense. She must be thinking the same thing he was: *I don't need them trying to cure me, and finding out about No Longer Human!*

"It's true, I totally wiped the floor with Pansy," Dazai chimed.

Percy looked between the two of them. Then, he shook his head and turned a scolding look onto Dazai. "I'm sure you don't need reminding that breaking your opponent's arm is not a legal dueling technique."

"Winners always fight dirty," Dazai told him.

Percy's lips pressed together thinly. "Regardless. Professor Spleen and Apprentice Wiggins are here to take care of the students, and that includes you. Let them look you over. Perhaps they can do something about your..." Here, he trailed off uncertainly.

But his gaze had flashed to Dazai's bandaged eye for a long second, and Dazai got his meaning. *"Nah,"* he tapped the edge of his bandages, then rolled his wrist, "this thing is a lost cause." The new hole in his face did come with several new medical upkeep tasks, which he was on-and-off neglecting, but these were magic healers. They'd probably just be confused by the muggle techniques Mori had prescribed him.

Hermione and Percy both looked sick at his casual dismissal.

Percy recovered first. "Look, Dazai. This isn't really a request. I can't abide you not seeing a healer."

"...can you try?"

"The healers are already waiting to see you. Come on."

Dazai groaned, long and loud. This time, Madam Pince did look up at them. Her glare was reprimanding, but fell away a moment later. She didn't even yell, but Percy still glanced at her apologetically anyway. Dazai huffed out a sigh.

Avoiding a healing spell was risky, but maybe this was a good opportunity to sniff out these new healers. If they were brewing the petrification cure, then...

Dazai shut his book and stood, resolved to his investigation.

Hermione blinked, then started packing her things up as well. She only stopped when Dazai lifted a hand. "You keep looking," he told her, and she sat back down with a little pout. "No reason the both of us have to be out of commission."

"Oh, all right." Hermione reached across the table for one of the other books they'd left untouched. It was covered it green scales and, every few moments, seemed to squirm. Dazai had carefully avoided touching that one. "I'll see if I can't find—*uh,"* her eyes snapped to Percy, then back, "something."

Percy looked between them dubiously, before sighing. He placed a hand on Dazai's back that had the mafioso stiffening. "Come on," he said, patting Dazai forward. "They've already been waiting ten minutes."

"Percy really took his time finding me!" Dazai needled. Still, he followed Percy obediently out of the library. "That doesn't sound like a responsible prefect to me."

They waved goodbye to Pince on the way out, but she barely glanced at them.

Percy made a face. "You are a difficult person to find."

"Really? I like to think I'm predictable."

"No you don't."

"No, I don't," Dazai conceded. "But still. The library is a given."

Percy didn't answer for a moment. He seemed focused on the halls around them—classes had ended only thirty-minutes earlier, so there were still quite a few students dithering about the place. When they walked by what looked to be a small club meeting, Percy nodded to the Hufflepuff prefect, Gabriel.

Gabriel nodded back, shooting a curious look at the odd duo. But he made no move to speak with them, and after a short moment, returned to an energetic-looking conversation with four first-years.

Percy turned them down a long corridor. After a long moment, with only the sound of muted chatter and their own footsteps filling the hall, he cleared his throat and asked, "What progress have you made?"

Dazai glanced up at him.

Percy met his eye. "With the basilisk." He frowned. "That's what you and Miss Granger were looking into, right?"

All the books on snakes, rare creatures, and magical mysteries must have given them away.

"Do you really want to know?" Dazai asked, whiningly. "I'm going to break a bunch of school rules and probably kill a giant snake. Percy shouldn't dirty his pristine prefect hands with all that."

"I want to be involved so I can *stop* you from breaking rules," Percy said, eyeing him significantly. "There must be a safer way for you to hunt the basilisk."

"There's definitely not. Anyway, what's the worst that happens?" Dazai flapped a hand. "Lockhart takes credit for all my hard work? *Blegh*. Who cares. That guy is just going to lie no matter what happens."

"You could be seriously injured, Dazai." Percy paused, like his words weighed a ton. Dazai hardly saw how. Then, Percy stopped walking. He had Dazai stumbling to not run into him. "It's—this isn't a game. Dazai. You could die."

"Woah," Dazai gasped, eyes sparkling as they flew wide. "You really think so!?"

Percy staggered.

The surprise on his face twisted into confusion, then a palpable worry. His brows pinched. "You... should not be excited about that. Dazai, should we talk? Privately, I mean. Or with a professor—"

Dazai blew a raspberry. "God, Percy is so serious," he said, voice teetering on laughter.

Deciding he'd had enough with these fussy Weasley antics, Dazai started walking again. They were in a long hall with no turns in sight, so luckily Dazai couldn't risk getting himself lost. Percy scrambled to catch up. "I'm serious, Dazai," he said, panting a little.

Dazai had no mercy for him, and only walked faster.

"Hogwarts does not have a counselor, so I will gladly offer myself... I—do you think about death often?"

"You're awful at this," Dazai clicked his tongue.

"Wha—" Percy stop-started. "This is serious."

"You're supposed to yell at me for joking about suicide, not get all—" he made a vague, distressed gesture with one hand. Like Percy's very existence grossed him out. Right now, it did.

"Suicide! Dazai, we really need to talk about this."

"Ugh, okay. Whatever," Dazai rolled his eyes.

Mercifully, the infirmary suddenly came in to view around the corner. Dazai thanked whatever lucky stars hung for him in the night sky, and hurried away from a sputtering Percy. Unfortunately, he could hear Percy's pounding footsteps only a few seconds after his own. But at least for now, Dazai could distract the Weasley Mother-Henning (as Dazai was starting to realize it may be genetic) with the ever more pertinent infirmary drama.

What was this world coming to, that Dazai was starting to *want* to be in the infirmary?

He grabbed the door and swung it open without fanfare. Percy squawked at his back—something about knocking first. Dazai didn't really care. The linen-fresh, potion-y smell of the infirmary met his nose first. Familair. It smelled clean, and not at all the iron tang of blood it had been last time. The crack in the wall was still there, though. But Dazai could neither see nor sense the basilisk peeking through it.

There was a very faint spilling of light through the windows and filtering through thin sheet curtains. Winter brought the sun low early, and every student at Hogwarts was by now used to spending most of their evenings under moonlight.

Just as Percy had suggested, there were already quite a few people milling about the infirmary. Two of them, Dazai recognized.

This was to say nothing of the petrified faces sleeping in the cots. Dazai's eye was drawn to where curtains were tightly closed around three particular cots. Pomfrey, Collin, and Norris, he assumed. He looked away just as fast.

Sitting on one of the unshrouded cots, Pansy was staring at her feet, frowning. Her arm was no longer in a cast, and also wasn't limply hanging at an odd angle like it had been after the dueling club. A wizard Dazai did not recognize was holding the arm aloft and inspecting it closely. This new wizard was wearing robes similar to the ones Pomfrey wore, but of a distinctly blue color, rather than red. Her hair was tied in several tight braids and pinned back. The look of concentration on her face was broken intermittently by the pinching of her brows or the curling of her lips. Standing beside them was Gemma, arms folded over her chest.

The only other person in the room was another wizard Dazai was unfamiliar with. The second new healer, he assumed. This man was markedly older than everyone else in the room, his face lined with wrinkles and a shiny pair of glasses over his nose. He had a large mole on his chin, with a single graying hair poking out of it. And though his clothes were similar to those worn by Pomfrey and this other matron, there was something distinctly

business about this man's. It was probably the tie around his neck. Or the neat cuff-links on his sleeves. But Dazai got the feeling this healer spent most of his time behind a desk, rather than in any infirmary.

The second Dazai threw open the door, everyone's eyes snapped straight to him.

Even the ever-moping Pansy whipped upright to face him. Upon seeing it was Dazai who had entered, her face flashed through several emotions whiplash-fast, before finally settling on a dim frown.

Dazai waved hello to her. Pansy's frown turned into a glower.

The older healer's face twisted up in annoyance. But before he could get a word in, Percy came stumbling and panting through the door behind Dazai. "Please don't run off like that, Dazai," he gasped.

The healers' eyes widened.

The matron attending to Pansy balked. Her face froze into one of those odd expressions she'd been making—lips pursed and brows knit like she might be about to throw up.

That was a typical reaction to meeting him, Dazai supposed.

As for the older healer...

The man's eyes widened in realization. Then, they sparkled. Like he was greatly excited by what he was looking at. A moment later, his mouth, which had been turned into an annoyed-looking frown, burst up into a welcoming smile. He took several steps forward and reached an arm out to pat Dazai on the back.

Instantly, Dazai stepped away.

Percy blinked, but said nothing of the reaction. He only straightened, now standing in front of Dazai like some kind of shield.

This man. This older healer. Dazai could smell the trouble on him a mile away.

"Mr. Dazai Osamu!" he greeted. His voice was grainy like a smoker, though Dazai didn't smell any ash on him. It had a tender quality to it that Dazai instantly distrusted, and was framed in by yellow teeth that Dazai distrusted even more. "So pleased to meet you. No need to hide now, son. Come here, come here."

He patted a spot beside Pansy.

"Professor," the other matron strained, "I'm still looking at this one. Set him down somewhere else."

By the way her voice warbled, Dazai thought it was more likely she just didn't want to work near him. Dazai could hardly blame her.

Pansy shifted in her seat. For a second, it almost looked like she had been making room for him. Which was the most baffling thing Dazai had thought all day—so much so, that he didn't even make a fuss about walking past her to sit in the adjacent cot. Percy stood over his shoulder.

"There you go," the Professor said, sounding pleased. He turned his back to Dazai for a brief moment to search through a doctor's bag, which had been left open on one of the tables Pomfrey usually used for sorting her potions.

During the brief pause, Dazai and Pansy locked eyes.

Then, the healer was speaking again.

"My name is Professor Spleen. This here is my apprentice, Wiggins," he gestured his wand towards the other matron—Wiggins—who looked ill to suddenly be the center of Dazai's attention. "And you're Dazai Osamu, of course! Everyone knows you. The Demon Student."

He sounded awfully excited about that, Dazai thought.

Percy seemed to be thinking the same. He cleared his throat. "Professor Spleen," he said tightly, "Dazai only needs a check-up. I would rather keep politics out of this."

Spleen looked annoyed at the interruption. "Politics are everything," he told them.

Dazai rolled his eye. *Politics are a pain in my ass,* he thought.

"Professor," Dazai said, "how long will you be at Hogwarts?"

Spleen looked a little surprised to have been asked a question, but he answered regardless, *"Oh,* some time, I think." That strange twinkle in his eye was back, again, and Dazai disliked it immensely. The wand was still in Spleen's hand. It was longer than Dazai's own, and of a much lighter wood. As he spoke, he gave it a tight little wave, and a few potions floated out from his bag and ordered themselves on the table. "There is so much to do, after all."

"Making the petrification cure?" Dazai asked, eyeing the potions warily.

Red, blue, and green potions lined up on the table. Dazai could feel the faint buzz of magic coming off of them. He could have sensed more, if he closed his eye and focused, but didn't want to shut his eye in the presence of so many wildcards. These new healers—Spleen in particular—were definitely on Dazai's radar. And Pansy, too. He didn't trust how subdued she was for one second. And, of course—

"Can we hurry this up?" Gemma said suddenly, sharp.

"P-pardon?" Wiggins squeaked. She pulled away from Pansy's arm like it had burned her, then frowned pointedly up at Gemma. "I can only work so fast, little missy."

"I mean him," Gemma reiterated.

Unsurprisingly, she had inclined her head to indicate Dazai.

He smiled back innocently.

"Gemma," Percy warned.

"Percy," she echoed, and Percy frowned deeply. "He's a danger. I don't want him around my kids." Here, her hand fell protectively onto Pansy's shoulder—the one Wiggins wasn't still looking at. But Pansy didn't seem comforted even slightly. She tried to shove Gemma off with a rough shrug, but the prefect didn't let up. Pansy's lip curled.

At this moment, Pansy and Dazai again met eyes.

A brief air of silence hung between them. She was looking at him like... *like...*

Like she's thinking something.

That was probably not good.

But Dazai's attention was stolen away a second later, when Spleen suddenly perked up. Dazai snapped to the older man, to see his face alight with interest, and one hand twitching like it was reaching for something. He'd even stopped grabbing potions to listen, and was instead only looking between Gemma, Percy, and Dazai like he thought they might drop something juicy to chew on.

"Mr. Dazai is a student too, Gemma. And," Percy glanced to Spleen. He must have also noticed the healer's sudden and acute interest. "Now is hardly the time to discuss this."

"Go ahead," Spleen said eagerly. "Never a better time than the present to air out grievances."

Gemma shot him a strange look, before saying, "I told Mr. Dazai that if he hurts a student, I will have him expelled. Well," she twitched, like she'd been intending to gesture wildly at him before suddenly remembering that she was holding onto Pansy, "what do you call this?" She gave the lightest push, and Pansy's no-longer broken arm swung.

Percy drew in a breath. "Gemma, he was acting in self-defense. You know—"

"I know that he's been nothing but trouble since the start of the year."

"I've yet to see any evidence of that."

"The Daily Prophet."

"*Outside* the Daily Prophet."

"What about the petrifications? I assume you think those are just some cosmic coincidence, *hm?"*

"There is no evidence—"

Percy and Gemma continued to argue with one another. Dazai found his attention wandering.

First, he looked to Pansy. She wasn't watching him anymore—mercifully—and instead was glaring between Gemma and Spleen.The curl of her lip revealed teeth, and Dazai thought was distinctly pug-like. In front of her, Wiggins was no longer working. At some point, she'd backed away. Now, she was looking frantically betwen the two prefects, eyes shooting left then right. Left, then right. A ping-pong argument.

Then, Dazai followed Pansy's gaze over to Professor Spleen.

No longer was his hand twitching for something—he'd sneaked closer to his bag and pulled out a small, leather-back journal. He was swiftly writing something in it.

The only indication of what he was writing, the *scrtch scrtch scrtch* of quill on paper, and the feverish way he kept looking over at the prefects. *Documenting their argument..?*

Spleen looked up from his journal. His eyes suddenly caught on Dazai's. He blinked once, then smiled sheepishly. He tapped the quill once to shake off a swell of ink. Spleen cleared his throat.

"Mr. Dazai wants to *stop* the petrifications, how is he a threat—*Oh."*

Percy's tirade came to a very sudden stop upon seeing Spleen's eyes on him. A second later, his face bloomed a peachy pink.

"Right. Sorry, Sir," he stumbled out, looking embarrassed.

Dazai wondered if he should reassure Percy—thank the prefect for standing up for him. But he swiftly decided against it. This Spleen character was sending off all sorts of red flags and warning bells. Dazai decided to watch his tongue. For now.

"This is all very interesting," Spleen said, and he actually sounded a little regretful at having to focus their conversation, "but perhaps it can wait. Wiggins, are you finished with the girl yet?"

Wiggins started to nod, but before she could confirm—

"Girl?" Pansy spat.

Venom dripped from her tongue. Everyone—Dazai included, startled at the suddenly biting mien.

"It's Pansy," she continued. Her hands—both of them usable, now—gripped and ungripped in her robes. *"Pansy Parkinson.* Did you forget that?"

Spleen whirled on her. His brows furrowed angrily, and his cheeks burst red. "That is no way to respect a healer. One that just fixed you, at that!"

Pansy rolled her eyes. Disrespect oozed off of her.

An itching giddiness sprung up in Dazai's chest. At this angle, Pansy's contempt was actually amusing. Better than being on the receiving end, he thought. Dazai almost started laughing,

but bit his tongue at the last moment to keep quiet. But from Percy's quick side-eye his way, and Gemma's sudden glare, he wasn't particularly successful.

"Whatever," Pansy said. "You only care about treating Dazai!"

Gemma's grip tightened. "Pansy, that's quite enough!"

"Now—now that's just not true!" Wiggins tried.

"I'm not an idiot. All everyone ever wants is to know what's up with this loser!" She threw her thumb out at him. "I saw you writing—Professor Spleen, right? Taking notes for the Daily Prophet? I've read some of your articles before!"

Dazai's eye widened.

That explained it! The strange behavior, the piercing looks, the quick arrival at Hogwarts—Spleen was a plant for the Daily Prophet!

Then, the more sobering realization, *another threat.*

Spleen, still clutching his quill and journal tightly, turned redder still at having been found-out. "Only one of you is worth writing about, girl. So mind your tongue."

"You want to know about Dazai?" She plowed over him. "He's *my* enemy, not yours. So keep out of Hogwarts until I'm finished with him!"

"Enemies?!" Wiggins squeaked.

"Miss Parkinson, please," Percy's voice strained.

Pansy ignored them. She declared with a scathing confidence, "And you don't have what it takes to write about Dazai, anyway. All of your articles suck."

This time, Dazai didn't hold his laugh back. He burst out in tinny giggles.

Pansy grinned triumphantly, then seemed to remember herself. She shot him a sneer. Gemma did, too.

It was only Percy and Wiggins who looked like they were watching a train derail itself before their eyes—and Spleen who looked like he was about to implode with rage. At Pansy. At all of them. He was fisting his journal so tightly that some of the pages had begun to tear.

Dazai continued laughing for several long seconds, and when his tittering finally came to a stop, the infirmary was very silent. No one was arguing or yelling anymore—not even Pansy—and they were all staring at Dazai like he'd grown a second head.

"Sorry, sorry," he apologized, not sorry at all. He pretended to wipe a tear from his eye. "It's just. Pansy so rarely says something entertaining, I was totally caught off guard!"

"Hey," Pansy bristled.

It was quiet for a few moments, an uncomfortable stillness in the room. Dazai could say with some certainty that not one of them had anticipated this being how the meeting would go. A plant from the Daily Prophet, arguing prefects, and a confrontational Pansy... *what's next?*

Eventually, Wiggins cleared her throat to gather up everyone's attentions. Doing this, she took a single step backwards, and promptly tripped over Spleen's shoe. It was another few, stuttering seconds before she regained her footing.

"I understand your concerns, Miss. *Uh.* Miss Parkinson?"

Pansy lifted a brow.

Wiggins was looking more than a little ill, now. She looked desperately between Dazai and Pasny, like she was no longer certain who was her biggest threat. "And while we would certainly like to get an interview with Mr. Dazai, our first priority will always be healing—"

"No, no, no," Spleen suddenly burst in, shooting a silencing glare his apprentice's way. "We must get an interview with him. My career depends on it!"

"Professor!" Wiggins shouted.

Dazai looked between them, and everyone else was doing the same.

"That career of yours," Dazai drawled. And like magic, suddenly they were all looking to him instead. But Dazai was used to that by now. "The one where you heal people, or the one where you write poor-quality articles?"

"You brat," Spleen's entire face was puffed up and read.

"Can we please," Percy said, taking a slow step in front of Dazai, "just finish this check-up? If not, I will be taking my student out of here. Now."

"*Your* student?" Gemma scoffed. "He's a snake."

"*Oh*, don't start this again."

The air was bristling—volatile. Not at all the soothing, linen-soft atmosphere Dazai knew Pomfrey liked to keep. She could be fierce when she wanted to, but she always had kept the peace. There was no peace-keeping now. The tense atmosphere in Hogwarts was biting, here. His eye wandered over to one of the closed-in cots, where Pomfrey or one of the other victims slept. Then, he glanced to the crack in the wall.

More and more, these days, was the infirmary turning into some kind of battle ground. The place where Dazai always seemed to be under fire, and shooting back twice as hard.

Pansy was watching him.

He frowned, briefly, then offered her a teasing smile.

Again, her expression was strange. Thoughtful. She blinked at him in a way that was meant to convey... Some kind of meaning. Dazai didn't know. Then, to the healers, she suddenly said, "I'm all healed now, aren't I? Can I leave now?"

Wiggins startled. Then, "Well. Yes. It's like I said before."

"And this idiot isn't even hurt," she gestured to Dazai, and he twitched at the sudden attention. What was Pansy thinking? "So he's leaving with me."

Pansy promptly got to her feet. Gemma's hand was finally torn off.

Everyone stared at Pansy, stupefied—Dazai chief among them. "I'm sorry," he said, "you want me to come with you?"

"Are you coming, or do you want the Daily Prophet trying to heal you?" Pansy said. Her eyes flashed quickly to Spleen's wand on the table, then back. Some hidden meaning shone in that look. Dazai's eye widened, then narrowed.

"You can't dismiss my patients, girl." Spleen bit out, taking a striding step towards Dazai. But Percy was still standing guard in front of the mafioso, and didn't budge. Spleen cursed. "What is this? Is this disrespect what Dumbledore is teaching you all?"

"Not for much longer," Wiggins mumbled.

"Let's not speculate," Percy said, a little weakly.

Dazai stood, a mix of cautious and completely befuddled as to what Pansy was thinking. Last time they'd spoken, she'd tried her damnedest to kill him. Now, she was... *what?* Giving him an out?

Pansy nodded, satisfied, when he moved to follow her.

Wiggins sputtered. "Let me at least look at that eye!"

"No offense, but you can't fix it any better than Mori did," Dazai told them, scampering underneath Percy's arm. "Actually, you can take offense to that."

"You two—get back here," Gemma warned.

Pansy flipped her off on the way out.

Dazai couldn't help it. He burst out in gleeful laughs again.

Dazai's laughter echoed through the infirmary just as more yelling erupted. Then, when the door shut behind them, echoed throughout a mostly empty hallway. "Pansy has totally lost her mind!" He chortled, hurrying to keep up with her. "I didn't hit you're head during our duel, did I?"

"Can it," she spat back.

It was only after they'd made it past several turns, and down one spinning staircase (Dazai, following along like an obedient dog, too baffled to give up chase now), that Pansy finally slowed down. Dazai was starting to recognize their surroundings, a little. The cold walls of the dungeons were beginning to fill in around them.The stones lining this part of the school were old enough to sport small cracks all over.

The Slytherin common rooms were near here, he recalled.

Dazai slowed his steps accordingly, until he was no more walking than he was inching through the dungeons.

Pansy shot him an annoyed look over her shoulder. "What are you doing? Follow me."

"Offense intended, Pansy, but I'm not exactly keen on going to the Slytherin common rooms with you," he told her candidly. "Where all your little friends can attack me." Where Crabbe and Goyle could hold him down, then sock him in the cheek. Only this time, they might take it even further.

Pansy huffed loudly. She sounded more exasperated than guilty, which Dazai thought was as irritating as it was in character for her. She leveled him with a significant glare, then said—a little sheepishly, Dazai thought—"I only want to talk. Calm down."

"I'm perfectly calm," Dazai told her. He picked up the pace to walk with her again to prove it. "It's only that Pansy has spent so long trying to kill me I'm a bit hesitant."

"I haven't been—" she pursed her lips, then looked away. Caught in a lie, or not wanting to say more. "I want to talk," she repeated.

Dazai totally didn't trust Pansy one bit.

But.

He followed along obligingly, regardless.

Pansy eyed him for another short second, before turning to face the hall in front of them. It was another few moments of walking before the portrait of Elizabeth Burke came into view. Burke jolted in her painting upon seeing them. Pansy ignored her, but Dazai gave her a cheeky wave hello. Then, Pansy was opening the door to the Slytherin rooms. Dazai hesitated just at the entrance.

A familiar smell met his nose—like dust and mildew. And though Dazai might otherwise find it quite sickly, he only sniffed to clear his nostrils of the smell. Though he had yet to step inside, Dazai could already hear the background noises he'd come to associate with the common rooms. The small flickering of hot flames. Muffled conversations. And the *tap-tap* of pawns on the chessboard. It had been months since Dazai had last set foot in here. For all the staff knew, he spent every morning and night in the dorms. But the Hounds' office was a hundred times quieter, and came with significantly less threat of being maimed in the night. It also had Egg and Featherbrain, sometimes, which Dazai could appreciate.

Now, Dazai was walking into the common rooms again.

The first thing he thought was, *it's as cold as ever!* Even though the fireplace was roaring and crinkling as it ever was. It cast a warm glow over the whole room, but only managed to give Dazai a chill.

Immediately, the common room fell dead silent.

There were about a dozen people milling about—all of them now staring, wide-eyed at Dazai and Pansy in the doorway. Milli and Tracey, with their green ties undone around their necks, shot to their feet first. Their chairs almost fell out from behind them, if it weren't for Blaise hastily standing to catch them both.

"What is he doing here!" Tracey shouted. A chorus of agreement followed her.

Blaise was walking across the room before anyone could blink. He was at Dazai's side within the second, and staring into his eye deeply. "What's going on? Are you okay?" He looked to Pansy, then back again.

"He's fine," Pansy spat. "We're both fine, thanks for asking."

"Oh," Blaise blinked. He looked Dazai up-and-down once more, before pulling away. "I didn't mean it like that. Between the two of you, it's Dazai who's more likely to hurt himself."

Dazai pouted. "That's unfair."

And thought Pansy turned her nose up at that, she didn't bark at him. Instead, her head whipped to the other Slytherins. Dazai followed her gaze to where Draco was standing by the chess board. It looked like he was half-way through a game, and very steadily taking the win. Goyle had been sitting across from him when Dazai entered, but now he was a brick wall standing guard. Crabbe did the same by the fireplace. The other Slytherins were a murmuring mass around them.

"Pansy," Draco said lowly, "what's going on?"

She scowled at him. "What do you care?" She shook her head, purposefully looked away when Draco winced.

Crabbe cracked his knuckles. "We beatin' him up?"

Goyle took a menacing step forward. "Yeah!"

"No!" Pansy spat.

Crabbe and Goyle both blinked, bewildered. Around the room, everyone else did the same. Dazai only rocked on his feet, wondering just what was going on in Pansy's head.

I want to talk, she'd said.

Dazai waved a friendly hand, and everyone but Pansy, Blaise, and Draco recoiled. As if he could cast a spell with a hand gesture alone. No wand, no cast, no nothing. "Pansy and I are —" he started to say.

"I'm talking to him," Pansy interrupted. Dazai's mouth snapped shut, and her shot her an annoyed look. "Alone," she continued, uncaring. Then, because they were still getting skeptical and bewildered stares all around, she pressed, "No witnesses. Capiche?"

Silence.

"Pansy..." Draco warned. Slowly, he was rising to his feet, trepidation written across all of his movements.

She whirled a glare on him, silencing, and this time didn't turn away when he grimaced.

Blaise inclined a brow. "You say that like you're planning to—"

I want to talk, Dazai had to remind himself. *I only want to talk...*

"Oh!" Dazai pipped, "Pansy's going to murder me!"

Draco choked.

Pansy swiveled to Dazai with eyes screaming, *shut up! Are you an idiot!?*

"I'm," she started, glancing first to Blaise—who was now watching with the kind of plain expression he usually wore—then to the room at large. And though everyone was staring at Pansy like she was insane, Dazai got the feeling that they weren't exactly displeased with the idea of her killing him. Dazai wasn't opposed to being killed. He was only a little opposed to Pansy being the one to do it.

"Ugh!" Pansy groaned suddenly. Half the room jumped. "I'm going to do whatever I want with Dazai! Just—just get out so I can do it alone!"

A pause.

Then, as one, almost every Slytherin in the room turned to Draco.

"Uh," one said wisely.

"Should we," another swallowed, "go?"

Draco's eyes snapped to each and every one of them. But in the end, they fell to Dazai.

A silent line of communication buzzed between them.

Dazai blinked slowly—cat-like—then looked to Blaise. "You all might as well just leave. If Pansy murders me, just make sure I don't turn into a ghost, okay? I want to die for good. Anything else is just torture."

Blaise lifted a solitary brow. But after a second, he nodded. "I don't know how to stop that from happening," he said, "but sure." And with that, he turned and left the common rooms.

Pansy watched him go, mouth agape. Apparently, she'd expected more fuss from him.

Dazai's—and by extension Blaise's—approval seemed to be all Draco needed. He nodded tersely to himself, then declared for the entire room, "Pack up and move out, snakes. Pansy is going to have a talk with the demon." He glanced to Pansy, now, something shadowed and severe in his eyes. She stared back. The only indication of her true emotions was the slight warbling of her bottom lip. "No witnesses," he echoed.

Pansy stood stiffly in front of the door as every snake slithered past her, and out the door. Dazai took a careful step to the side, certain people would bump into him otherwise. Not once did Pansy look away from Draco while this happened.

Draco, meanwhile, was only looking at Dazai. Just as he passed, he muttered under his breath, "I hope you know what you're doing, Boss."

"Who, me?" Dazai grinned. "Always."

Draco's lips pursed. He didn't really believe it. But he was gone a second later, regardless, the door shutting at his back with a thud.

Then, the familiar sounds of the Slytherin common rooms were silent. Even the crackling fireplace seemed to have dulled.

Pansy let out a breath. Her shoulders fell.

Dazai eyed the obvious relief with some skepticism. When Pansy realized he was watching her, she scowled once again, and promptly stomped across the room to—

Dazai snorted. "You're going to lose," he said.

Pansy grumbled something unintelligible as she sat down at the chess table. She sat at the side Draco had been wielding before—white—and went about resetting the board. She slid the white queen away from the black bishop, where it had been preparing its sure victory one move at a time.

"Sit," she told him.

He watched Pansy slide the last black piece into place before taking the seat across from her. The cushion pulled him in. "We did this last year," Dazai commented as Pansy moved her first pawn. "I'm not going to kill another troll for you, Pansy." Last year, when Pansy had demanded Dazai give them a show of loyalty, that had been his roundabout solution. They'd had that conversation, too, while playing chess. Dazai had absolutely destroyed her, of course. He planned to do the same now.

He moved a pawn of his own. Squinting down at it, Pansy said, "then don't."

Dazai leaned forward on his palm while Pansy made her next move. Another whole turn passed before Dazai poked, "So?"

Pansy rocked a knight back and forth. Dazai clocked the slight movement with an astute eye. Already, he could see himself several moves ahead, no matter what decision Pansy would make. After a few seconds, she finally made her decision. Pansy's knight took one of Dazai's pawns. It *clicked* on the board. Dazai reached forward to move his bishop. All according to plan.

"What's your deal?"

Dazai paused, the bishop hovering just an open square. "What are you on about?"

"During our duel, you erased my spell."

Dazai startled badly. He accidentally slammed the bishop down, earning an almost amused look from Pansy. But a second later, her expression was severe once again. Dazai found himself matching it.

"Again: what are you on about?" He asked, the line of his mouth tense.

"Don't play dumb," she snapped, "because I'm not an idiot. I cast *Expelliarmus* perfectly. But when you touched me... it was like ice. My entire body felt like it had frozen. Everything. And I couldn't use magic."

"You stuttered," Dazai told her, recalling—a little frantically—Pansy's desperate, choked cry of, *'E-expelliarmus!'* that day.

She glared. "I know what happened."

Their stare held for several, long moments.

It was Dazai who looked away first—more to gather his thoughts, than anything else. He tapped the board with one finger. "Your move."

Pansy continued to watch him, still.

Dazai waited until she looked down at the chess board, squinting and deep in thought, before blowing out a sigh. "Just what are you asking me, Pansy?" he said after pause.

She stroked one of her bishops, but after a few seconds, her finger fell away to toy with her front-most pawn. She looked up at him, intent, and Dazai held the stare carefully. "There's something going on with you," she said. "There always has been. Draco and Blaise know about it. I know they do. Sneaking you around the Malfoy Manor like that. And you're doing things with magic that shouldn't be possible." Here, Pansy's arm twitched—the one that had been broken just an hour ago. "I'm sick of being the odd-one-out. Tell me what your deal is."

Dazai wasn't sure whether he should laugh or not. "I'm not going to tell you anything," he said harshly. "Knowing you, you're going to turn around and tell everyone. Where will I be then, *hm?"*

Expelled. Probably expelled.

Though if Dazai was being honest, he was feeling on edge. Had been since Winter Break, and moreso now that Pansy had revealed that she'd sussed out No Longer Human.

Pansy took one of Dazai's pawns with her own. She glared bitterly at the stolen piece. "And you would deserve it, if I did."

Dazai frowned. *"If?"* he repeated.

Her glare hardened into something almost brittle. Her fingers twitched like they needed something to do. Dazai considered lending her his coin—the one he used when his fingers got twitchy like that. But instead, he shifted his bishop across the board, stealing one of Pansy's pawns in trade.

Pansy almost looked relieved to have something to do again. She started fidgeting with one of her pawns almost immediately, but didn't take her turn just yet.

"I hate you," she said.

It sounded sincere, so Dazai nodded. "I hate you, too. Glad we can agree on that."

"But," Pansy said, only shooting him an unamused look at the jab, "those two like you." She paused, then shook her head so timidly that her bangs barely even swayed. "I don't know."

Dazai leaned deeper into his palm, looking contemplatively at Pansy rather than the game unfolding before him. *'Those two'* had to mean Blaise and Draco. He remembered how angry she'd gotten when he'd suggested Blaise and Draco preferred his company to her's. How she'd cried at the Malfoy Ball, when they had proven him right. How she avoided meeting Blaise's eyes over lunch even now.

He hummed.

"Jealousy isn't a good look," Dazai said idly.

Every time he brought up Pansy's jealousy, she would shrill at him. Burst into explosive rage. He prepared himself accordingly. But now, she only sighed.

Pansy looked suddenly very tired.

"Oh," he teased. "Are we being honest about our feelings today?"

"Shut up," she grumbled. "You don't know anything." She—mindlessly, it seemed—took Dazai's bishop with her king. It was an awful move, but Dazai pretended to consider his next move for a while, regardless. "My best friends keep secrets from me. Important secrets. They've changed so much... and even Draco—it's like he barely cares what his father thinks anymore." She squeezed the black bishop hard. Strangling it. "Things have changed too much, since you came here."

You don't have to tell me that, Dazai thought. Comparing his life before Hogwarts and after was sometimes too much for him to reconcile. Every single day, locked in his room, or Mori's office, or the kennel. Father's fists. A series of extravagant waltz's he couldn't attend. His happiest moments during those before-days had been the quiet ones. After a violent shoot-out, when Father was organizing their response, and Mori was busy patching people up. He'd be locked in his room, alone, spending hours and hours reading old books, cheating himself in cards, and practicing coin tricks to show Mori later. Hogwarts was. Different. It was chatting with friends. It was learning something new. It was digging his nose where it didn't belong, and looking up to see Blaise watching him fondly. It was also petrifications, and lies, and worst of all Lockhart. But Dazai basked it in all the same, like a long dream.

Dazai supposed it wasn't the same for him and Pansy. But he still felt this burning change in his veins almost as sharply as he felt No Longer Human.

He stared at her shadowed face from across the table.

"If you were smart," Dazai said suddenly. He tapped the board. "You would forfeit now."

She didn't look up, but Dazai heard the familiar twinge of annoyance in her voice. "What? I'm going to lose?"

"In three turns, yeah."

Pansy scowled at the board, then lifted her chin to give him the same look.

"You know," he said, "those two would hang out with you again if you opened yourself up a bit."

"What, emotionally?" she snorted.

"To the idea of not murdering me."

Pansy stilled. Then she clipped, "take your turn, Dazai."

He hummed, and moved his queen obligingly. She frowned at the move, and Dazai wondered if she finally could see how this game was going to end.

"It isn't that easy," Pansy barked at him. For a second, Dazai thought she was talking about chess, but it became clear a second later that she was talking about something else. "My family—Draco's family—is important. We can't just associate with whoever we'd like."

"Aw, is Pansy admitting she wants to be my friend?"

"I want to be *their* friend again. But they want to hang out with you, and that's—"

"Social suicide," Dazai drawled. He'd gathered as much from Draco. But the young Malfoy had been slowly and surely turning around on the subject. Hanging out with him more. Sneaking around his father's back, even before he really met Dazai. "I know."

"You're a mudblood, what do you know?"

"About risking the ire of your family?" Dazai said, a little bitterly despite himself. Mori and Father's images flashed in his mind for a split second. "Yeah... what would I know."

Pansy gave him an odd look.

He sniffed, internally shaking off the treasonous thoughts. He eyed her. Pansy's problems with Blaise and Draco had at some point, invariably, become his problem as well. And though Mori had said to let her do as she pleased... *Well.* That hadn't really been working out for him so far. And things, he thought, would probably go smoother if she was under his thumb. At the very least, he would appreciate them being on the same page. And looking at Pansy, now, Dazai thought that maybe this—just this one thing—he could reconcile.

"Blaise gave me some advice awhile ago," Dazai said, bereft of nothing, "It means absolutely nothing to me, but maybe you'll get some use out of it."

Pansy's eyes narrowed distrustfully. Dazai thought she would do better to turn some of that focus onto the chess game she was about to lose.

He inclined his head. "Take your next move and I'll tell you."

Pasny's expression soured. But after a pause, she ducked her king behind the row of pawns, watching him all the while. Dazai snorted at the move.

"What did Blaise tell you?" she snapped.

Dazai rolled his eye. "He told me, *'you should choose to be selfish.'"*

Pansy blinked several times. Dazai would have laughed at the strange expression, if he hadn't felt the same when Blaise had given the advice to him. *What do you mean,* he'd thought, *I'm the most selfish, no-good person I know!* But Blaise always spoke his mind. And both Pansy and he knew that Blaise didn't just say things for the hell of it. It was something he had thought was worth saying, so Dazai did too.

"He told you to be selfish?" Pansy asked, stupefied. "What kind of advice is that? Did he tell you not to do your homework, too?"

"Not in so many words," Dazai cheeked. At Pansy's dull look, he explained, "You're worrying too much about what your parents think. About what everyone thinks. If you want to hang out with those two, then you just should," Dazai said, matter-of-fact and thinking, "That's what Blaise would say."

"Oh," Pansy said. She deflated a little, slumping back into her seat. "He would."

Dazai pretended to hem-and-haw over his next move.

Pansy eyed him over her king. "...you know him pretty well, *huh?"*

Dazai blinked at her sedately. "Blaise? Sure. He's my favorite."

Pansy's nose scrunched up. "Blaise and Draco... are they," she breathed, "happy? Being selfish, or whatever."

Dazai paused to consider that for a moment. "Sure," he said eventually. "I mean, Blaise was always just going to do whatever he wanted."

"And Draco?" Now, her voice pinched with obvious distress. Dazai remembered very suddenly how desperately she'd tried to protect him from his father on the train ride home. And all the yelling she'd done at the Malfoy Ball some days later.

"I think he's getting there."

Pansy said nothing at all to that, only lapsed into a still kind of quiet. If it weren't for the slow draw of her lungs, Dazai might mistake her for a particularly annoying-looking statue. The crackling fire moved more than her. Dazai took this opportunity to make his final turn, and slid his queen across the board, effectively pinning Pansy's king in place.

He waited for her to realize.

Suddenly, Pansy shot upright with a gasp. "What the hell!"

"Three moves, weren't you listening?"

"You—" Pansy scoffed. "Idiot! I'm having an emotional crisis, you're supposed to let me win!"

Dazai raised his arms in a pacifying gesture, but he was grinning, so the image had little effect. "I have a win-streak to keep up. I'm being selfish about it, like Blaise would want."

"Idiot!" She shrilled again. "Idiot!"

Without warning, she suddenly picked up her king and threw it at him.

Her aim missed by a mile and went sailing through the air instead. It hurtled for the fireplace.

"Ah!" Dazai squeaked.

He reached out to catch it, but his fingers only probed the air. Dazai tensed, waiting for the piece to clatter noisily against the floor, or to burn up in a cloud of smoke and flame.

Neither of those things happened.

The white king hovered in the air.

Dazai's fingers, splayed out at them, quivered with the faint vibration of magic. When he twitched his fingers, the king shifted in the air. It was suspended by Dazai's magic two feet above the ground.

Dazai stared at it for a long moment, certain that if he moved the piece would drop.

It was Pansy who shook him from his thoughts. "No. Do *not* tell me that you're actually good at magic."

Dazai curled his fingers into his palm, and the king floated a few inches back towards him. He repeated this gesture another couple of times until it was within reach. Then he plucked it from the air. At once, the buzz of magic—*Wingardium Leviosa,* Dazai recognized the signature as—faded away.

"I'm awful with magic," he told her candidly, now rolling the piece in his palm and inspecting it.

"That was wandless, castless magic, Dazai," Pansy argued, clearly unamused. "You have to be pretty good to do that."

He glanced up at her. "You think?" he asked, and set the white king down in the middle of the board beside his black queen. "I didn't mean to."

"You didn't—" Pansy cut herself off, staring at him with eyes somewhere between gobsmacked and insulted. "That isn't possible."

Dazai shrugged, because it was the truth. Magic had been coming easier and easier to him lately. So easy, in fact, that he'd more than once, now, cast a spell on accident. *Motus Subtilis, Incendio,* and now *Wingardium Leviosa.* And that was neglecting whatever little trick he'd pulled on Quirrell a year ago. Going from no magic at all, to magic at a great cost, to magic so simple he was doing it with only a thought...

Dazai wasn't quite sure what to make of it. He stared down at his hands like they might give an answer. But the magic that had been buzzing around them seconds ago had dispersed the second the king was no longer levitating.

Pansy was eyeing him suspiciously across the board. "Merlin," she said, "you're such a weird guy."

Dazai grinned at her, a little halfheartedly.

She made a face, like she was about to say something she was going to regret. Or like she might throw up.

"I want in," she said after a moment.

Dazai lifted a brow. *"In?* No way."

"You don't even know what I'm asking," she grumbled, and Dazai shrugged.

"Don't care. If it's *you..."*

Pansy spoke over him, glaring. "You're all hunting down the basilisk, right?"

Dazai nodded dubiously. Then, in lieu of nothing, began to reset the chess board. He started with the pawns and ranked his way up from there. The only piece he didn't move—the white

king. It sat in the middle of the board, alone and out of place.

"I'm helping."

"Are you?" Dazai asked.

"Yes," Pansy decided. "It's—if you're really *good*, like those two say, then I want to see it for myself."

Dazai started to laugh, but partway through it turned into a sigh. "Another Show of Loyalty? Just kill me already."

"You can't die yet. Not until I've made up with Draco and Blaise. They like you for some inane reason."

"Oh. Goody."

Pansy glared at him. With one hand, she snatched the white king from its wayward spot, and slammed it down where it belonged with so much force the whole table rattled. "Common sense be damned... I just want things to go back to normal. So I'm joining your club. Let's kill a basilisk, or whatever."

"It's a gang," Dazai said. "And you can't just invite yourself!"

"I just did! Stupid Dazai!"

"It's *Boss* if you want to join!"

"Over my dead body!"

"Boss! Say *Boss!"*

They spent the next hour bickering over one thing and the next. Dazai had never conceded to Pany's joining the gang, and Pansy never conceded that she couldn't invite herself. But by the time the other Slytherins filtered back into the common rooms, there was a shocking lack of blood and viscera on the floors. No bruises or broken bones. And the fire was still rumbling out a usual, warming glow. Pansy and Dazai both had wandered off to their respective activities well earlier.

The only evidence indicating their conversation at all: a chess board absent of its white king.

Dazai's clever fingers had swiped it from the board mid-rant about *subordinates showing proper respect!* and it now sat rather proudly beside his *'World's Okay-est Professor'* mug. Another trophy for his dogs to ogle with jealousy.

Chapter End Notes

spleen and wiggins are canon hp characters, i just had to dig through the wiki a bit to find them lol. if the name "wiggins" sounds familiar thats bc she's first (?) named in chapter 9 as (one of the) st mungo's staff poppy was in communication with.

next up: investigation!

Another Team Building Exercise

Chapter Summary

The gang meets a ghost.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"There's no need to be so harsh," Mori had written, in response to one of Dazai's less-than respectful comments, *"the fruits of our labors will reveal themselves shortly."*

The letter had arrive just that morning. In fact, Featherbrain's awful hooting had woken Dazai up when she'd arrived. He'd startled, sitting up wide-eyed and throwing his blanket to the floor, only to find the owl preening, self-satisfied, on the sofa's armrest. She'd promptly dropped the letter in his lap. The only good thing about the whole situation was that Featherbrain had gifted him one of Mori's really fancy pens—the kind that Dazai knew she must have pilfered. Mori was probably fuming over the loss. That thought made Dazai smile, so he hadn't scolded Featherbrain to hard.

Still.

The fruits of our labors...

Dazai had read that line over three times before finally burning the letter up with an incendio. No evidence left behind ever again.

And also no orders. Mori's letters continued to be largely useless. Dazai was starting to think Mori just missed having someone around to pester constantly.

The letter's contents had bounced in his head the entire walk to the Great Hall. Dazai stretched his arms over his head and cracked out a yawn on the way. The halls were perfectly still, save for a few twitching statues and watchful paintings. Dazai paid them no heed, and they largely ignored him in return. The only exception had been a particularly Hufflepuff-looking painting that had cursed down at him when he'd passed underneath it.

Bleh.

It left his ears ringing, but still could not swamp out the echo of Mori's letter.

The fruits of our labors...

Dazai had to push the grand doors to the Great Hall open himself. It was still far too early for the other students to be awake—the sun wasn't yet fully risen—so the halls were empty, the

doors closed, and the souring smell of healthy breakfast foods had yet to waft through the air. It was honestly the only time Dazai could really appreciate the Great Hall. Because of this, he was frequently the first student to arrive. Today was no different. He started for the Gryffindor seating and—

The entire staff table whipped to face him.

Dazai froze in place. His spine snapped straight. He stood, still, half-way between his seat and the ajar door.

Typically at this hour, it was only Dazai and a few staff awake. McGonagall, usually. Snape, sometimes. A few assorted others. Trelawney and Vector always arrived together, and usually several minutes late. This morning, they were all here. McGonagall, Snape, Trelawney, Vector, Lockhart, Flitwick—Dazai could go on, but he didn't actually care to know all their names. It was evident from their harried stares and the way they were huddled, that the staff had been deep in some important conversation.

"Mr. Dazai," Snape said first, cutting through the tense silence they'd abruptly fallen into, "what are you doing here?"

Dazai frowned. He suddenly became aware that Dumbledore wasn't among them.

"Breakfast?" Dazai said, like a question. "Maybe I should be asking you that. What's going on, Sir?" Dazai's mind was at once buzzing a mile-a-minute. No Pomfrey—so it wasn't that. But there was still glaring at him, like whatever bee had gotten in their bonnet was still somehow Dazai's fault.

"Ah! The demon arrives?" Spleen said, bouncing. Among the staff, he stood out like a sore thumb. Where the others were quiet and tense, he was excitedly looking around, and hovering just over his back was that notebook of his. A quill was levitating above the paper, writing something frantically.

Several of the professors shot him a scathing glance—Snape most notable among them. Dazai observed this all with a calculated stare. *Mori's missive echoing in his head. Dumbledore's absence. The way Spleen seemed to practically be vibrating in place.* The pieces clashed together at once, and Dazai blurted, "Where is the headmaster?"

Snape twitched, and around him, some of the staff shared quick, horrified looks.

Finally, it was McGonagall who stepped out of their huddle. Her shoulders were a stiff line, and the wrinkles around her eyes seemed more pronounced even from this distance. "Sit down, Mr. Dazai," she said, voice leaving no room for question. "An announcement will be made shortly."

Dazai rocked back on his heels, and for several seconds they only stared at one another. The other staff had yet to leave their huddle, but they had also yet to return to their chatter. Dazai's presence had evidently disrupted them. That realization itched at him, and, rather sitting as McGonagall had told him, he asked, "how much of this is my fault?"

McGonagall blinked, clearly caught off-guard by the question. Behind her, Snape's eyes narrowed, and several of the other professors turned a suspicious eye onto him. Spleen's quill jotted down something. And Lockhart—for once looking a little subdued—suddenly let out a single, bursting laugh.

McGonagall sent Lockhart a silencing glare, and he winced back. "This is nothing to do with you," she said. Then, skeptically, "Why?"

"If something bad happens, I'm bound to be blamed for it," Dazai told her honestly, and saw Snape's expression tighten all the way across the Hall. "Some time to prepare myself would be appreciated."

Now, more than ever.

Now, when Mori's words—*the fruits of our labors*—were telling Dazai this time, it probably *was* his fault. And if his suspicions were correct...

McGonagall's stare didn't shift, and her lips remained in a thin, pursed line. "Sit," was all she said after a few seconds.

Dazai puffed out a sigh. But he did as he was told and trudged to the Gryffindor table. His friends hadn't arrived yet, so Dazai settled himself at the head of the table, alone. It was where Percy usually sat, which meant he was liable to being relocated after the prefect woke up in a few minutes. But it was also closest to the staff table, and Dazai loved a good eavesdropping. He settled his bookbag on the table in front of him. Unlike for the other students, food rarely ever manifested before him. Dazai wasn't hungry now, and wouldn't have eaten if it had, but he might have appreciated having something to look busy with. As it was, the staff were shooting him suspicious looks all the while he got settled. Dazai pulled a book out from his bag and pretended to read.

'...Due to transfiguration magic's unique fundamental qualities, it can have many varied applications. Ranging from minor alterations—such as the traditional 'match-to-needle'—to the more complex form changes—animagi being the most exceptional—'

"What are we going to tell the students, exactly?" Vector asked, voice hushed in a tense whisper.

Dazai flipped the page, but his eye didn't focus on its contents. At the staff table, McGonagall made a sound of displeasure.

"We will tell them what we must," she said.

"Not everything," Snape cut in quickly.

There was a pause, where Dazai imagined McGonagall might have glared at the potion master for his interruption. But he didn't look up to check, and only squinted down at a strange figure depicting a man transforming into a dog.

"Well, why not?" Lockhart asked. "If it's the demon's fault Albus is gone, we should say!"

"Hush!"

Lockhart coughed. "It's the truth."

"It's speculation," McGonagall hedged.

"It's Albus' own inaction that got him removed as headmaster," Snape said.

Dazai's finger twitched, and the paper of his book made a resulting *shff!* noise. He flipped the page to cover it up. None of the staff shouted at him, so he didn't think they'd noticed his reaction.

Dumbledore was fired, he thought to the book. So it was true—Mori's schemes were beginning to take effect. This was the confirmation he needed. Because there was no way this wasn't what Mori had meant by fruits.

"Exactly! He should have expelled the demon months ago!" Lockhart was saying.

"Inaction about the petrifications, you fool!" Snape argued.

"Oh," Spleen said, "can't it be both?"

"That's true. The Department of Education cited both the petrifications and the Demon Students as reasoning."

"You mean the petrifications *caused* by the demon?" Lockhart said, chuckling out a laugh.

McGonagall snapped at him, "There is no evidence of that."

Lockhart choked. *"Er...* yes. Ma'am."

Ma'am? Dazai perked up at that. He'd never seen Lockhart show deference like that to anyone!

"Minerva. Regarding Mr. Dazai. Have you heard back from—" Snape started to ask.

"The Daily Prophet? It's only been a few hours since I sent the letter, Severus."

Snape blew out a tight-sounding breath.

"Keep quiet about that Demon business," Vector said, voice so hushed Dazai had to strain to hear it.

"I mean," Trelawney hummed, voice just as low, "he is sitting right there."

The conversation lapsed into silence for a long moment. Long enough that Dazai looked up from his book to see what had happened. Upon looking up—

Immediately, the staff jumped and looked away. They must have been staring at him. Only Snape and McGonagall didn't turn away, guilty, so Dazai gave them a friendly wave hello before sticking his nose back in his book. It was talking about animagi still, which Dazai

thought was both interesting and way above his skill level. He flipped through a few pages until finding something a bit more basic to skim over.

Someone sighed.

"This is a cluster."

"It is."

"Well, what are we going to do?" Flitwick asked. "Can we expel... you know who? Could Albus come back then?"

McGonagall scoffed. "That isn't happening."

"Well, why not!?"

"We need Albus here!"

"I'll be the one saving the day, don't you worry," Lockhart stage-whispered to Spleen.

"Can I quote you on that?"

"Certainly!"

Snape grunted—Dazai could recognize that disgruntled voice anywhere. He found himself perking up on instinct to hear what his favorite professor had to say next. "It's up to Minerva what we do," he said, tone gravelly. "Seeing as—"

Snape cut off abruptly as several footsteps suddenly began filling in the Great Hall. Dazai looked up—first to the staff, then to the door. Just like Dazai had, the students froze briefly before entering before hurrying off to their tables.

"We'll finish this later," Snape grumbled. "As for the students..?"

McGonagall ran a hand down her face. "I will tell them what I must."

"Lying to the students?" Spleen pipped.

"Avoiding a riot," McGonagall said dryly. There was a sound of rustling cloth as she ushered the rest of the staff back towards their table. "Sit. I will make the announcement shortly."

They did as they were told, and a variety of breakfast foods magically appeared in front of each chair. A steaming pair of coffee mugs manifested in front of Snape and McGonagall and they drank without waiting for them to cool.

With the staff no longer in a huddle, Dazai thought the Great Hall looked as it always did. A calm, morning air around them. Food slowly beginning to populate the tables. Only he and the few other students present were privy to the previously tense atmosphere. Because of this, when the next bunch of kids arrived, they sleepily stumbled to their tables as though nothing

were wrong. Dazai flipped through his book to avoid the stares going his way. It was a relief when Fred and George finally showed up.

"Mornin'," Fred greeted with a massive yawn. He all but collapsed on Dazai's right.

George sat on his left, looking no less awake. "Morning, Little Snake."

"Wake up, you two," Dazai said by way of hello. They continued to sleepily pile up their plates, and responded only with a grunt each. "We have work today."

"Work?" George asked. "So early?"

Fred lathered up two slices of toast with butter, then passed one to George. In turn, George gave his brother a cut-up grapefruit.

"Guess that's what we get for asking let in on the plan," Fred said. "Well, what's up?"

"Work," Dazai repeated non-specifically. He waved a hand around. "You know."

"Actually, we don't ever know what's going on in the brain of yours."

"Not usually, anyway. So what's—"

Before he could finish, Hermione and Ron sat down the table across from them. The twins' mouths blew open into wide grins, looking a little more awake now.

"Morning, you two," Fred beamed, "come looking for Dazai's latest scheme, too?"

"Oh?" Hermione blinked, fishing across the table for a fruit. "Are you checking out the girl's bathroom today, Dazai?"

"Checking the *what?"* Ron sputtered.

"Basilisk," Dazai told him, though Ron still looked more than a little dubious. "And that's the plan. Why, you want to tag along?"

Hermione smiled "Only if you'll have me."

"More the merrier, then," Dazai said. "But we'll have to be quick. I have a lesson with McGonagall this afternoon, so we'll need to finish up before then." Dazai glanced to the staff table. McGonagall was staring out over the sea of students, speaking lowly to Snape beside her. He looked away. "Probably. Anyway, I just want to get the lay of the land. I'm saving the big stuff for later."

"Nothing dangerous, I hope," Percy said, arriving in step with Ginny and Luna.

"Big bro is worrying again," Fred and George snickered.

He shot them a scolding look before looking skeptically back to Dazai. "Do I need to be worried?"

Dazai grinned. "Not today, no."

"...good. Let's keep it that way."

"No promises!"

Ginny tittered. "Good luck, Dazai. Let me know if I can help."

"If *we* can help," Luna said, and Ginny flushed a pleased shade of pink. "I've always wanted to perform an exorcism."

"Luna, I don't think that's..." Ginny trailed off as she and Luna took their seats a little further down the table. Percy sat beside them, though the prefect seemed only to be here for breakfast and never once chimed into their conversation.

"Performing an exorcism, are we?" Fred asked, and George said, "don't let Nearly Headless Nick hear you say that!"

At the mention of one of Hogwart's resident ghosts, Dazai pouted. "I want nothing to do with ghosts." After all, ghosts were about the only thing at Hogwarts that could sense No Longer Human. He didn't need any of that.

"Ooh! Sounds like drama."

"Yeah, spill, Snakey!"

"Nothing to share. I just don't like them."

Hermione perked up. "There's no need to be so hostile, Dazai," she said. "Actually, I have a rather interesting fun-fact about the Hogwart's ghosts that may change your opinion on them!"

There was no changing Dazai's mind. And Hermione's 'interesting fun-fact' actually turned out to be several not-very interesting lectures. They all humored her spiel, only occasionally breaking off into side-conversations or making off-hand remarks. Hermione was half-way through the story of how the Bloody Baron died (a suicide! Dazai continued to be terribly jealous over that tidbit), when McGonagall suddenly commanded the Great Hall silent.

"Students," she called, voice equally solemn and stern. The Great Hall fell into a hush immediately. "Thank you," she said. "This is a sensitve announcement, so I ask you to keep your speculation and questions to a minimum."

A few worried titters echoed around the room. Dazai heard Ginny's nervous voice among them, "Percy, what's going on?"

McGonagall stepped forward until she was at the head of the student tables. Her eyes passed over the gathered children and never once lingered. They skipped over Dazai like she hadn't even noticed him. Eventually, her gaze settled somewhere on the far wall. "Albus Dumbledore has been removed from his position as headmaster of Hogwarts—"

"What?!"

"Oh my stars!"

Uproar thundered out of the Great Hall. Several students shot to their feet in shock, only to be tugged back down by wide-eyed friends.

"The headmaster is gone!?" Hermione squeaked.

"I mean," Ron gasped, "it's been in the papers for weeks, but I didn't think it'd actually happen!"

At McGonagall's back, the staff were looking to one another frantically. And Dumbledore's usual seat at the center of their table remained empty as ever. Around the room, many of the students seemed now to be realizing his absence. Shouting shook the Great Hall. Dazai, who had already gleaned this information, only watched the proceedings with a stoic frown.

McGonagall raised a hand, and a tense quiet fell again. But an anxious energy still buzzed in the air so potent the hair of Dazai's arms rose. McGonagall waited a few moments until it was clear the shouting had died down. Only then, did she continue, "This was not a decision made by Hogwarts staff, but one made externally. I can assure you, this was not a decision taken lightly." Another pause, this time to take a heavy breath. "I have been appointed Headmistress in his place. The rest of this school year will continue as normal—I will speak with each of my classes individually regarding potential changes to my teaching schedule in light of my increased workload. Thank you."

With that, McGonagall dismissed herself from the room. She walked with shoulders pulled back and a straight spine past several tables of gawping students. Her demeanor left no room for questions. Finally, after many tense seconds, McGonagall vanished out the door.

Predictably, the Great Hall exploded into conversation the second she was gone.

"That's crazy," Fred and George gaped.

Dazai glanced at them, ducking his head and very aware that several eyes all around the Hall were now flicking his way—no doubt finding him responsible, somehow. "Is it?" he asked. "Ron is right, I've been reading about it in the paper for ages now."

Ron chewed through a slice of toast as quick as he could manage, then said, "S'true! That Deer Organization, or whatever."

"It's DOE," Hermione corrected. "As in Department of Education."

"Right. That."

"I'm not sure where they came from. I mean, just a couple months ago, I'd never even heard of them! And now they're making hiring decisions at Hogwarts?" Hermione shook her head.

A few seats down, Luna leaned forward. Her hair slipped over her shoulder and landed in a bowl of oatmeal. She didn't even seem to notice. "My Father had never heard of them, either.

This Department of Education is quite mysterious, showing up out of nowhere. Perhaps they've some alternative motive? Though I fail to see why ever they'd want Headmaster Dumbledore gone. Everyone loves him."

Ginny lifted Luna's hair from the bowl and began wiping it clean with a napkin. "Well, that's not exactly true. Is it? I mean, he didn't do anything about the... the petrifications."

Percy shifted uncomfortably at her side. Then, he shook his head. "That's enough. Professor McGonagall told us not to speculate on the matter. We will leave it at that."

"Aw, but that just makes me want to speculate more," Dazai drawled, leaning into his palms. Nevermind that he already knew the truth behind Dumbledore's dismissal, and DOE's role in it.

Percy shot him a look. But before he could say anything about it, he suddenly blinked and sat up straighter. Dazai frowned at followed his gaze.

Snape was walking towards their group. There was no mistaking that focused gait—he was heading straight towards them.

"Good morning, Professor," Percy greeted.

Snape grunted. "I would hesitate to call anything about this good," he grumbled. Percy squirmed, but Snape had turned to Dazai instead. "Mr. Dazai. Minerva's recent promotion puts her in a tight situation. Your private lessons with her are hereby cancelled. Do not use this free time to put yourself into trouble. Do not practice transfiguration on your own. Do not—"

"—have fun?" Dazai finished for him. Snape glowered. "You're such a stick-in-the-mud, Sir."

Snape glared.

Dazai sighed. "Fine. Whatever. I'll behave myself."

He nodded. "Good," he said. Then, with pinched brows and a low tone, "this talk about hunting down the basilisk better be a joke, Problem Child."

Hermione and the twins shared a frantic look beside him. Dazai only grinned. Snape waited for several seconds for Dazai to answer. But when he received nothing more than a shit-eating grin for the entire breath's duration, he sighed, long and aggrieved. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Under his breath, he grumbled, "I need to put tracking spell on you." Dazai pretended not to have heard, and a moment later Snape dismissed them to their weekend.

Around the room, whatever students weren't still lingering to chat or eat were leaving. It was a small crowd—in part because attendance was low these days, and in part because there was a lot to chat about. And while Dazai loved a good chat, he also had business to get on to. "I'm going to get moving," Dazai told his gang, eyes still searching out over the crowds.

"What, now?" Fred and George blinked. "You haven't even eaten breakfast yet!"

Dazai made a face. "I'll eat lunch," he bartered.

"Dazai! Breakfast is the most important meal of the day! You've got to have something." Hermione said.

"Whoever told you that was lying. The most important meal is lunch. I read that. Somewhere."

"What? Where?"

Dazai sniffed, then looked away to avoid the apple Hermione was suddenly shoving under his nose. "I'm messing with you, 'Mione. Who cares about that sort of thing?"

"I do!"

He turned to the twins next. "Tagging along?"

"Course!"

"Obviously!"

Dazai nodded—and just about chinned the apple Hermione was still pushing his way. If only to stop her from fussing, he plucked it out of her hand. She made a satisfied noise that he ignored.

He tossed the apple up and caught it. Then, he got to his feet. "Then let's get moving, gang."

The twins got up first, and Hermione followed a second later. Ron, Ginny, Luna, and Percy stayed in their seats. They were still finishing up breakfast. Or, in Percy's case, eyeing the oncoming shenanigans dubiously. Dazai bid them all a quick farewell before hurrying away.

Hermione caught up to him just as he was walking out the door. "We can take our time and look around, now," she was saying, "since your lesson today was cancelled."

"That's right," Fred said.

"More time to look around for..." George trailed off. "...what are we looking for exactly?"

Dazai glanced around the hall before answering, wanting to be sure they wouldn't be overheard first. Lowly, he replied, "wherever it is the basilisk spends most of its time. The Chamber of Secrets, I think."

"Woah, that is so cool."

"Glad I've got your attention," Dazai told the twins cheerily. "I'd like to find the entrance today."

Hermione nodded, serious, while the twins beamed excitedly. But they all stuck with him, regardless of their emotions on the matter. Dazai supposed he couldn't really ask for better subordinates, on that front.

Dazai was about to tell Hermione to take the lead—she was certainly a better guide than him—when Pansy suddenly turned the corner, speed-walking a mile-a-minute.

Straight at them.

Damn.

The twins followed his gaze. Immediately upon seeing the Pansy-shaped missile impending upon them, they squared their shoulders and took a protective step in front of Dazai. Dazai appreciated the thought, but—

"Oh, quit it," Pansy spat. The twins blinked several times at the open hostility. "This loser and I are on speaking terms now. I'm not going to attack him or anything."

The twins shared a look. "Evidence speaks to the contrary," George hedged, and Fred crossed his arms.

Pansy's frown blistered, and she shot a glare through the gap of their barricading bodies at Dazai. "Tell them I'm not going to kill you."

Dazai made a so-so gesture with one hand that Hermione balked at.

"Dazai!"

"Alright, alright," Dazai huffed. He gave the twins each a pat on the back, disarming. They met his eyes for a long moment, before finally stepping aside. But there was no mistaking how they were still tense at his sides. "I'll call my guard dogs off, but if you try to hit me they *will* bite."

"Damn right we will!"

Pansy's nose scrunched up. "That's disgusting."

The twins glared at her. And even Hermione, at Dazai's side, was scowling at Pansy. Dazai decided his guard dogs had the hostility factor covered, so he asked a (slightly) more amicable, "What do you want, Pansy?"

She turned to him, and looked straight past the others as though they were the only two occupants in the entire school. Hermione made a sound of offense. "You're looking for the basilisk right now, yeah?" she asked, then didn't wait for an answer. "I'm coming with."

"You're what now?"

"You can't just invite yourself!"

"Yeah. This is like. An exclusive event."

Pansy scoffed. "It's hardly exclusive. Seems like Dazai's just inviting anyone to join." Here, her eyes fell somewhat accusatory to Hermione.

Hermione's mouth dropped open, then a blooming red covered her entire face. "Excuse you!"

"Now, now, children," Dazai said, stepping forward. "I'll pay attention to all of you if you stop yelling."

"Oh, bite me," Pansy snapped. Then, she seemed to remember herself and glanced a bit nervously to the twins. She took a wary step away from them.

"No thanks," Dazai said. He turned to a glaring Hermione, "keep leading the way, please?"

She gasped. "You can't serioiusly be okay with her coming with, Dazai! I-I know you broke her arm, and if you feel sorry about it, that's—"

"Oh, I don't feel sorry about that at all."

"Idiot," Pansy sniffed.

Hermione blinked several times. She shook her head. "Dazai..."

"I don't want her coming with," he said, "but Pansy will follow anyway. She's like a burr in my side. Or a tumor."

"Don't call me a tumor."

"A jealous tumor," he amended sagely.

"You—!"

Dazai lifted a brow, then devilishly replied, "I'll call you what I want, until you finally choke up the word *Boss."*

Pansy stared at him, deadpan. "Boss."

"Not like that," Dazai frowned. "With feeling!"

Pansy said nothing more, so Dazai only turned back to his gang. The twins were watching him with skeptical stares, and Hermione with something a little more contemplative. But after a few moments, she conceded. "If you're sure."

"I guess it's only a little embarrassing if she kills me in a girl's bathroom," Dazai said, cheery when Pansy tried and failed to smack him in the arm. "So Pansy can tag along just this once. Blaise would be happy we're hanging out, anyhow." He could almost imagine Blaise's pleased little smile when he saw they were getting on. It would be just a little tilt of his lips. Or even something as small as a shift in his eye. Blaise was good at subtle expressions like that.

...Pansy was not.

Hermione started guiding them again a few stalling seconds later. Dazai and the twins, in one line, followed up behind her. Pansy took up the rear several feet behind them.

If Dazai didn't know any better, he'd say she wasn't a part of their group at all. It actually kind of looked like she was stalking them, from that distance. And every time Dazai glanced over his shoulder at her, Pansy's entire face would be puckered up like she'd bitten a lemon. Her arms were crossed and her shoulders were pushed up to her ears. The only decent thing about her was that she at least wasn't stomping. Pansy was actually fairly quiet behind them. It was only that she'd tried to kill him a couple times that had Dazai's attention always lingering on her, despite it all. Pansy caught his eye and scrunched her nose. Dazai stuck his tongue out at her before spinning around to face Hermione's back once again.

It very quickly became clear that Dazai did not know where they were going.

The second floor... he was sure he had classes on this floor. But for the life of him, he couldn't place their surroundings. Stone. Brick. Suits of armor and those awful paintings. Everything was the same as everywhere else, and yet distinctly different all the while.

"Typical Dazai," Pansy said amusedly at his back when he mentioned this aloud.

Hermione whirled a glare on her. Dazai preemptively lifted a hand to ward off a fight, not wanting to draw attention to this currently-abandoned part of the school. When she saw this, she deflated a little, but there was still a spark in her eyes. And when they finally arrived at their destination, Hermione's voice was clipped when she said, "this is it. The closed girls' bathroom."

Fred and George both clapped—ready for business, and Dazai found himself echoing the gesture.

Pansy, however, was again making a face. "This is your big plan?" She eyed the bathroom door with some distaste. "A bathroom?"

"I've got it on good authority that we'll find what we're looking for in here."

"And whose authority is that? Your own?"

Riddle's, actually, Dazai thought. He grinned instead, and Pansy sniffed. Hermione rolled her eyes at their bickering. Then, with one hand braced against the bathroom door, she looked quickly down one end of the hall then the other. It was empty. Beside him, Dazai saw the twins subtly check the Marauder's Map as well.

Dazai was about to suggest they hurry inside before someone did show up to bust them, when the twins blurted, "Looks like we've got company."

They all jumped, hurriedly looking to-and-fro for any sign of an audience. The corridor was just as empty as it had been seconds ago. And the only sounds around were their own talking —not even the distant echo of footsteps sounded out. Dazai and Hermione shot the twins asking looks, and Pansy scowled at them distrustfully.

George cleared his throat to gather their attentions. "It's Dazai's unlucky day," he said mournfully.

Dazai, looking between Fred and George bemusedly, asked, "Isn't it always? What now?"

George stuck his thumb out at the bathroom door. Hermione's hand, still hanging there, suddenly pulled back as if burned.

"What is it?" She asked cautiously.

"Well, it's Dazai's least favorite thing, of course!" George gestured. "Or, one of them, at least." He shook his head. "There's a ghost inside!"

Pansy stared. "What in Merlin's name are you on about? How would you even know that?"

With Pansy's attention suitably distracted, Fred hastily stuffed the map back into his cloak and out of sight. He cast a surreptitious glance in Pansy's direction, then nodded, evidently confident the Slytherin girl had not seen the Marauder's map. Those twins sure could be sneaky when they wanted to be. Freed up, Fred whirled on them, "Well, I suppose it could be a living, breathing human person. But with a name like *Moaning Myrtle..."*

"That's a ghost for sure. Only ghosts have names like Moaning Myrtle."

Pansy's gawp morphed into a scowl. "But how do you know someone is in there?" She didn't wait for an answer and whipped to Dazai. "How do they know?"

Dazai, feeling both vindictive and a little amused, only grinned. "Call me Boss and we'll see if I tell you."

"Ugh. I can't stand you."

"The feeling is mutual," Dazai intoned. He turned to the others. "The ghost is a problem," he said, thinking of No Longer Human, "but I really need to get a look in there."

Hermione hummed. "Maybe this Myrtle is like Professor Binns?" She wondered. "As in, not entirely aware? Maybe they won't even notice we're here."

"Or maybe they'll scream bloody murder and the staff will give us all detention for sneaking into closed-off areas," Pansy grumbled. "And then a suspension for hanging out with this loser." She gestured at Dazai.

"Just say I'm kidnapping you. That's worked for me before," Dazai told them.

The twins coughed out a laugh.

Pansy didn't argue the point, only squared her shoulders. Dazai thought she must have agreed with his idea. Otherwise, she would have yelled at him and called him a name. When she didn't, Dazai indicated to the rest of his gang it was time to get moving.

Then, they were stepping through the door. Hermione went in first, a puff to her chest that told Dazai she was steeling herself against the rules they were about to break. Once she was in, the twins made a sweeping gesture for Dazai to follow.

Immediately, a shiver ran up his spine. There was a chill in the air and it rose the gooseflesh of Dazai's arm. He hunched up his shoulders and stepped further into the bathroom. "How long has this place been closed for?" he asked, looking around.

The bathroom was, for lack of a kinder term, in total disrepair.

Actually... Dazai wouldn't mince his words—it was gross.

He lifted his coat so it wouldn't drag across the floors, which were a moldy and wet gray stone. The row of stalls was scratched and knocked around. One of the doors sported a spray of graffiti which Dazai couldn't read for how bad the handwriting was, and another door had been torn entirely off its hinges. Hanging on the wall was a cracked mirror, stained with spots of water and soap. Dazai wondered if the sinks were still operable. They didn't look it.

Hermione coughed at the room's musty smell. "I-if your theory is correct—"

"Oh, about fifty-years I'd say. Not that anyone's been counting."

Everyone jumped—except for Dazai, who had felt the ghostly presence some moments earlier.

Hovering three feet above the air with legs and arms crossed, a translucent girl was pouting down at them. She had wide-rimmed, cracked glasses and pig-tails spouting out from the sides of her head. But the most notable thing about her, of course, was the deathly and see-through quality of her skin. A ghost.

Dazai double-checked that he was still wearing his gloves, and Pansy shot him a strange glance across the room.

"If you're here to paint all over the walls, you'd best be leaving now!" The ghost warned. "I'll scream until a professor comes! Or-or I'll possess you!"

Fred and George laughed heartily. "If a ghost could possess us," they said confidently, "then surely Peeves would'a done it by now!"

"Right! That's a bluff if I ever heard one."

It was scarcely noticeable, but Dazai thought the ghost blushed. *"Oh!* Boys are the same no matter the era! You're all just here to bully poor, stupid Myrtle, aren't you!" Myrtle drew in a breath Dazai wasn't sure she really needed, being dead and all, then blubbered out, "Just get out! Just get out, I won't hear it!"

"Wh—please calm down," Hermione said, "I'm sure they meant nothing by it. Isn't that right, you two?" She shot a pointed look at the twins.

Fred coughed into his fist. "We didn't really do anything."

"Just pointed out the truth, y'know, and—"

Hermione's stare needled.

Dazai, deciding he didn't want to stand around bickering in such a disgusting place all day, took charge. It was his job as boss, anyhow. "Miss," he said suddenly, drawing everyone's eyes to him. "We're actually hear to get your help with something."

Myrtle blinked. "My help?"

"Who else's?" Pansy asked, arms folded over her chest. She was still standing by the now-shut door and had yet to move further in with the rest of them. The curl of her lips told Dazai she was just as disgusted as he was. When she shifted on her feet, the floor squelched.

Myrtle looked between all of them with a reassessing gaze. After she did her rounds of them, her eyes fell back onto Dazai. Her brows furrowed. "What's that about you? That arua." She asked, floating in close to hover near him. "Never seen an aura before, y'know. But that's one, if I'll ever know it."

Damn. It was only a matter of a few seconds before No Longer Human was getting called out! This was exactly why he didn't like to pal around with ghosts.

Dazai cringed and took a step back. It had him nearly bumping into a wall covered in a green-and-black mold. He lifted a gloved hand, palm out. "I wouldn't touch me, if I were you."

"Oh!" Myrtle squeaked. She reeled back in the air. "Why not? 's it dangerous?"

"Very."

Myrtle phased through a stall door and vanished from sight.

When she didn't appear for several more seconds, Pansy whirled on Dazai. "An aura, *huh?"* She drilled him with a stare.

Dazai shrugged.

Pansy looked to Hermione, Fred, and George for explanation, only to find them sharing a look of their own. She whipped back to Dazai accusingly. Dazai ignored her. Instead, he took a tentative step further into the room—still careful to keep Mori's coat from getting too grungy on the floor. He started towards the stalls, then decided better of it thinking he might accidentally nullify Myrtle. In front of Pansy no less.

"Don't just ignore me, idiot," Pansy barked, splashing as she stomped over to him. "I'm getting involved in your *you-ness* whether you like it or not. So just tell me what's going on!"

Dazai stared into his reflection. It was hard to make out with all the stains on the mirror, but he could see where his hair was poking out in odd places around the bandages. He huffed out a sigh, and caught Pansy's eyes in the mirror. She was scowling. "You've already guessed it last time we talked," he told her tiredly. "It's just lazy if you make me spell it out."

'My entire body felt like it had frozen. Everything. And I couldn't use magic.'

Dazai saw the exact moment when Pansy recalled this conversation, because he was recalling it now as well. She'd asked him about No Longer Human, despite not having the words to

articulate her suspicions. Now, her eyes widened minutely, then narrowed into thin slits.

Hermione cleared her throat uncomfortably at their backs.

Pansy leveled Dazai with a final, assessing glare before turning to Hermione. Dazai didn't move, but did search out Hermione's blurry reflection in the mirror. "What?"

Hermione looked nervous for all of one second before returning Pansy's hostile gaze in full-force. Dazai and the twins snickered to see it. "We're doing important research into the history of Hogwarts, you know. There's no room for squabbling or secrets," she told them both with a notable look. "Pansy—if you can't stay focused, then I'm certain there's no place for you in our basilisk investigation!"

Dazai's snickering turned to an outright guffaw.

Pansy shot him a simmering glare that Dazai pretended not to have seen and fussed with on of the sink taps instead. It creaked but didn't move.

"I'm more focused than you could ever be, mudblood!"

"That's it! I won't tolerate you—"

Moaning Myrtle's head suddenly popped out of floor.

"Did someone say basilisk?"

Hermione and Pansy both screeched. They stumbled into one another to avoid stepping into the ghost's head, then glared like it was the other's fault.

Dazai finally turned from the broken sink. The twins manifested at his sides one each.

"You know about the basilisk?" he asked hopefully.

"No," Myrtle's voice drew out, sounding like a long moan. "What sort of business are you all up to?"

"No good," Fred pipped.

"Rumor has it," George said, "there's a snake maybe living around here somewhere! Seen anything, have you?"

"A snake!" Myrtle gasped. "Where?!"

While they talked, Dazai let his eyes slip shut as he felt around for magic. It took a lot more concentration than usual because of how Myrtle's ghostly presence kept flickering and buzzing at the forefront of his senses. But when he really focused, her magic slipped away. He cast about the bathroom.

"No idea. Round here, abouts," Fred guessed.

"Eugh! Well, I haven't seen any snake. But no one comes in here anymore. *Oohh!* Maybe there is a snake. S'not like anyone would come and shoo it out for me... Now I'm all creeped out! Look what you've done!"

Someone took a step and splashed water.

Hermione spoke. *"Er...* I'm sorry. Can we all stay on topic, please?"

Pansy snorted.

"That goes double for you," Hermione told her. "I let you out of my sight for five minutes and you're trying to kill my friend!"

There was a pause, where Dazai imagined Pansy to be rolling her eyes.

"Gossip!" Myrtle whispered in a voice full of awe. "It's been ages since I've heard any gossip!"

Dazai, giving only the barest of attentions to the conversation, continued to throw his senses around the bathroom. He felt a faint buzz of magic coming from the grafitti'd stall. The paint had a spell on it. Probably to make it impossible to erase—Dazai could ask the twins about it later. If anyone knew a spell for general annoyances like that, Fred and George would. There was also a small spell tucked within the sinks, still and inactive. But that could be anything.

"You said the bathroom's been closed for fifty-years," Pansy was saying when Dazai blinked his eyes back open. "was that when you died?"

The twins, upon seeing Dazai was back with them, each gave him an encouraging grin. Dazai looked to Hermione. She was watching Myrtle, but, apparently sensing Dazai's eye on her, looked to him promptly. Understanding shot between them.

Fifty years ago.

The last time the basilisk was loose.

The student that died.

"Dreadfully!" Myrtle insisted. "I died dreadfully!"

Pansy grunted. "In a disgusting bathroom," she said, lifting her heel and grimacing at the slick sound it made, "that's embarrassing for you."

Hermione whirled on Pansy, but the damage was already done.

Myrtle screeched—so loud the mirror cracked.

"Awful! You're all awful! Bullied even after death, I can't believe!" Myrtle sobbed loudly and vanished once again into one of the stalls. *"Ohhh..."* the stall door wailed.

Dazai eyed Pansy, who was looking a little bewildered but not particularly apologetic. Then, loudly he announced, "I apologize for my awful subordinate's behavior, Miss Myrtle. I'm still training Pansy not to bite."

"You—!" Pansy reached to swat at him, but Fred caught her hand mid-air. He only let go after she stopped struggling. "Don't start with that, idiot! You were thinking it too!"

Maybe. But Dazai certainly wasn't going to say it to Myrtle's face when they were still trying to wring information out of her. Besides that...

Dazai took a single step towards the stalls, but didn't get so close that he might accidentally kill the ghost is she suddenly sprung out again.

"I'm actually something of a death enthusiast, myself," he told the empty stall, voice singing longingly. "I would love to join you in being dead someday. No body, no brain. Just a splash of blood where my corpse would be... I bet you don't even need to breath. That sounds lovely..."

His friends were all giving him strange looks now. But Dazai ignored them, because a few seconds later, Myrtle's head popped back out of the door.

"...you mean it?"

Dazai smiled. "Absolutely! Can't imagine a better thing to do than dying! I'm really jealous, you know."

He wasn't.

Dying sounded lovely. Being dead sounded better. But this strange, blurred in-between thing —*ghosts*—Dazai didn't like that at all. Life after death was just another kind of trap. It felt too much like the sentient paintings around Hogwarts for his liking. Imprisoned behind ornate, gilded frames and at the mercy of whoever had painted them. Unmoving. Dazai still didn't like even thinking about them. And at some point, he'd begun considering the ghosts and paintings something like a cosmic enemy of his.

But most of what Dazai had told Myrtle was true, and she seemed to believe him either way. She sniffed, and wiped at her eyes.

"I don't," she said snottily, "need to breath, that is. But I like pretending."

Dazai nodded like that made sense. She hovered a little closer to him. "...what did you want, again?"

He beamed. "Tell me how you died! I've really got to know."

Myrtle pulled herself together. Around her, the others stepped in to listen. *"Ooooh,* it was dreadful. It happened right in here. I died in this very stall," Myrtle said, sounding a little excited at having so much attention. She hovered in front of one of the unbroken and un-graffiti'd stalls. "I remember it so well. I'd hidden because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and I was crying, and then I heard somebody come

in. They said something funny. A different language, I think it must have been. Anyway, I was really busy crying, you know? So I unlocked the door, to tell them to go and use another toilet, and then—I died."

Dazai blinked at the abrupt ending.

"Just like that?" Hermione asked.

"Did you even see who it was?"

"Oh, some boy," Myrtle said.

"That isn't helpful," Pansy told her plainly.

Myrtle sighed. "You know, nobody missed me even when I was alive. Took them hours to find my body—I know, I was sitting there waiting for them. Olive Hornby came into the bathroom—*'Are you in here again, sulking, Myrtle?'* she said, *'because Professor Dippet asked me to look for you—'* And then she saw my body... *ooooh,* she didn't forget it until her dying day, I made sure of that—"

"A sudden death without pain or fuss... Now I'm definitely jealous..." Hermione shot him a warning glare—the kind she always sent him when he started to speak too fondly about suicide. He pivoted accordingly. "This boy you saw..." he said thoughtfully. Something like suspicion was starting to claw at his mind—the feeling you get when several little details are beginning to add up. Until the final confirmation comes in and blows the truth wide open. "That was probably who killed you, *huh?"*

"I suppose," Myrtle said. She looked a little put-out at having been interrupted.

Dazai's gaze wandered around the room before eventually settling on Myrtle again. "Where was the boy standing?"

She shrugged. The small gesture had her entire body floating up and down with it. "Over by the sinks, I guess."

Dazai went back to the sinks and began inspecting them again. A film of grime coated the entire thing. He was glad to be wearing gloves for this. Hermione came up on his side. She opened one of the taps, and a thin stream of water ribboned out. It splashed noisily against the porcelain basin.

"What do you think, Dazai?" She asked, shutting off the flow of water and trying the next one. "Could this be the entrance to the Chamber?"

Pansy crossed her arms. "It's just a bunch of old sinks. Maybe there's a secret door in one of the stalls." Saying this, she walked past them—nearly phasing through Myrtle in the process—and to the stalls. She threw open a door an peered inside. Her nose scrunched up at the smell.

"I hope its the sink," Fred said, pinching his nose. George nodded swiftly.

Dazai crouched down, balancing on the balls of his feet delicately. Most of the pipes below the sink were leaking. A steady *drop-drop-drop* echoed out from each of the sinks as Hermione tested them, a puddle was slowly forming on the floor beneath. Dazai carefully did not step into it. Only one of the taps didn't start—the one Dazai had tried earlier. Hermione made a curious hum when she found it.

"You said he was speaking another language?" Dazai asked. He flicked a pipe and it made a hollow noise.

Myrtle, who had floated over to Pansy and was ineffectually trying to swat her away from a particular stall, drifted over to him. "That's right. I've never heard anything like it."

"A spell?" Hermione said. Looking around, she guessed, "Alohomora?"

"I know the what the unlocking spell sounds like!" Myrtle huffed. "I was a student too, you know. If he was using some kind of spell, I think I would know it. No, it was some other tongue entirely. Like—"

Here, Myrtle opened her mouth and let out the strangest series of noises Dazai had ever heard. It was lisping and spitting and slurring. And maybe a bit like gargling blood. She sounded almost like a feral animal! But she did it all with a very straight face.

Pansy snorted. Without Myrtle's attention on her, she'd slipped into the stall and was now beating against the wall with her fist. The wall was solid.

Myrtle gasped and zipped back over to her. "Get out! Get out! Don't you know to respect where someone died!"

"Ew," Pansy grimaced, which only sent Myrtle into more hysterics.

The twins sighed, drawing their hands to their hips. "Well, that's a dead-end."

Dazai stood back up. He stretched out his back until it popped, then found the broken tap with his eye. Hermione had moved on from it and was now dragging her finger across the mirror like she was searching for some hidden contraption in it.

A dead-end.

Dazai didn't think so, actually. Riddle had told him about this—albeit in not so many words. But the basilisk could be controlled, he'd said, by speaking its language. Parseltongue. The language of snakes. And now, with Myrtle's testimony...

He thought about Tom Riddle. The diary—no, the *soul indwelling the diary*—who spoke parseltongue, knew everything about the Chamber and its basilisk, and had been withholding information regarding the events of fifty-years prior.

Dazai's eye narrowed.

"Someone alohomora this," he pointed to the broken tap.

"That's the entrance to the Chamber?" The twins asked, leaning in. They both drew out their wands, but Hermione had already grabbed hers and was casting the spell.

"Alohomora!"

There was a *click!*

But that was all. Nothing more happened. Hermione frowned, and tried the spell once more to the same effect.

Dazai nodded. He hadn't expected anything else. But the spell wasn't entirely unsuccessful. Just as that *click!* sounded out, Dazai had felt a roiling of magic in the pipes. Behind the wall. In the floor. There was definitely some kind of magical lock behind the broken tap. Only, they couldn't get in without parseltongue.

"It didn't work," Hermione pouted. She was staring down at her wand like it betrayed her.

"Oooh," Myrtle hovered over them. "A secret door? That's exciting."

"It would be exciting. If we ever get in." Pansy sniffed.

"We will," Dazai said, unduly confident.

Pansy eyed him skeptically. "And you're sure it's this thing we're looking for? If it's just a broken tap, you're going to look so stupid."

Dazai didn't grace her with a response, and Pansy scoffed.

He gave the sink another flick. "I have an idea," he told them.

They all perked up—even Myrtle.

"You do?"

"Goodness, now I'm excited!"

"How are we getting in?"

How would they get in? Tom Riddle would know. Tom Riddle *did* know. Had done it himself.

Dazai was sure of that, now. The diary was still hidden in his desk drawer. Sitting there, doing nothing but waiting for Dazai to return and ask his questions. *The events of fifty-years ago. When Moaning Myrtle died, overhearing a boy speaking a strange language,* Dazai thought, *that was you, wasn't it?*

"I'm good with picking locks," Dazai said with furrowed brows and thoughts elsewhere.

"Um," Hermione coughed. "No offense, Dazai. But this isn't something you can shove a hairpin into."

The twins agreed. "It must be a password of some kind, like the headmaster's office," George said.

"Not that we've ever tried to sneak into the headmaster's office before!" Fred laughed ambiguously.

This particular lock was impossible to pick with traditional means. But Dazai had spent the better part of twelve years learning how to sneak into things he wasn't meant to, or how to shift a deck of cards so you wouldn't realize he'd swapped a five out for an ace. Cheats were his thing. Cheating a lock was no different, really. Not to him. And on top of the plan steadily bubbling to life in his mind's eye, Dazai had Riddle. And Riddle would tell him what he wanted eventually. Everyone always did, when it was Dazai doing the interrogating.

"A pass-locked door," Dazai turned to face them, grinning slightly. "In a different language, no less," he puffed up. "Not to worry. I've got a plan."

Pansy groaned like she'd been stabbed. "You and your plans..."

-

Wiggins blinked once. Then twice.

She rubbed at her eyes, squinted down at the pad of paper, and read it again. It was several pages long and all covered in notes, arrows, and nervous-looking doodles. The medical jargon she understood. The speculatory ramblings, too. But. Blinking again did not clear up Wiggins' dilemma.

"Uh," she said.

Spleen looked up from his cauldron. It was pluming up thin, white vapors around his face and fogging over his glasses. He hadn't moved to clean the fog off, so Wiggins assumed he was still able to see. Somehow. The cauldron smelled faintly of roses.

"What?" Spleen asked, giving the potion a quick stir. The floral scent became almost cloying immediately after. "Did you find it?"

'It' being the magically sensitive child Pomfrey had been writing to them about.

"I'll get to work on the the cure," Spleen had declared just as they returned from breakfast, "you find our kid."

"Kid?" Wiggins had asked a little nervously. "Not. *Uh.* The demon?"

"No, no, not that blasted child!" Spleen had yet to forgive the demon and his little friend for how they'd bullied him the other day. Wiggins had initially been just as horrified to hear their disrespect. But now, several days later, she actually found it a little amusing. Not that she would be saying that aloud any time soon. "The sensitive one! Until the demon brat winds up in my care again, I'll have to write about this other one. Find me their papers already."

So Wiggins had.

It had taken a few hours. Pomfrey's organization was very precise, but not in any way that Wiggins understood. Nothing was alphabetical, or chronological, or symptomatic. It simply *was,* and Wiggins had no idea what to do with that. So she'd just picked one wall of the office and worked from there. It wasn't hard work. Most students at Hogwarts only saw the matron for bodily injuries. Falls from brooms, fights with bullies. The like. Wiggins only slowed her steady progress around the room to really inspect the notes when the student's condition was chronic—or sometimes if it just looked interesting.

But now...

Wiggins passed off the papers without a word. She didn't really know what to say, so she didn't say anything. Spleen took them forcefully, and they crinkled under his grip. He read them.

Paused.

Took off his glasses and cleaned them. Then read them again. "What is this?" he asked.

Wiggins sweated and shrugged. *"Uh.* The magically sensitive child?"

"I mean," Spleen's voice rose. He stabbed the page with a finger. "What is this?!"

At the top of the paper, where Pomfrey always wrote the student's full name, she had instead written this:

Problem Child

Wiggins wrung her hands.

She had known that Pomfrey was wary of them, if only because their correspondences had largely been ignored and otherwise been met with succinct responses. But still... this was something else entirely! Why was Hogwarts' matron going to such lengths to prevent this student's name from getting out?

"Damn that woman," Spleen cursed, ostensibly thinking the same as Wiggins. "She must have been planning to write a paper on the child herself."

Wiggins very much doubted that, having read the notes herself. But she wisely did not comment this.

"Well," she said, "there are only so many students at Hogwarts. What's the likelihood they're still here?"

"Slim. This basilisk nonsense has chased most of the brats off."

Wiggins' brows pinched. "Surely, the other staff would know—"

"Bah! The only reasonable person here is me. None of these fools will tell us a thing."

Spleen, still bearing into the Pomfrey's notes, seemed not to notice how his potion was starting to bubble over. Wiggins hurried forward to push him back a step before it sizzled over and splashed against the floor. The spilled potion steamed a small hole into the stone below.

Spleen and Wiggins blinked down at it.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Brats. Did Pomfrey just let anyone barge in here?" Spleen grumbled. He waved a hand and muttered a spell, cleaning up the acid spill. "Let them in, Wiggins."

She nodded a little stiffly then opened the office door.

The Slytherin Prefect was standing tense at the other end.

"Good afternoon," Wiggins greeted, then paused upon realizing she did not recall this girl's name. *"Um..."*

"Gemma Farley," she reminded.

"Right. Yes. Of course. You're..." Wiggins looked the girl up-and-down. "...hurt?"

Gemma shook her head. Her eyes trailed off Wiggins' face and to Spleen, who was rather huffily lowering the potion's temperature to prevent further spillage. Her brows knitted upon finding the freshly burnt hole.

Wiggins cleared her throat. No need to dwell on their mistakes, now. And certainly not in front of some impressionable child. "Then what can we do for you, Miss Farley?"

Gemma looked back to her. "I'm not interrupting, am I?"

Spleen scoffed from his corner of the office. "Only the cure for the basilisk victims," he said snidely.

Gemma shifted in place self-consciously. Wiggins, taking pity on her, offered a sunny smile that she did not feel at all. "Nonsense. What seems to be the matter?"

Gemma bit her lips and rocked in place. Whatever she had come for was significant, Wiggins could tell, and not something she had decided upon lightly. The hesitation rolling off of Gemma now had Wiggins all the more eager to hear what she had to say next. But when she finally spoke, Gemma's voice was sure as anything. "Is it true you want to write an article about Mr. Dazai?"

"We came here to help," she objected, offended.

At the mention of the Demon Student, Spleen straightened up. He whiled to face them. "What of it?"

Spleen's immediate interest gave too much away, but rather than berate them like the kids had before, Gemma seemed only to straighten with relieved confidence. Now, her face was pieced together with surety and stone. "I want to help."

Spleen and Wiggins both stared at her, bewildered. *"Help?"*

She nodded. "I can get you information. Or tell you the things I've seen. Whatever you want. I need..." Gemma sucked in a breath and drew up to her full height—which was nearly that of Wiggins' own, "...I need the world to really understand how bad he is. I need him expelled."

Wiggins almost laughed, but the severity of Gemma's expression made it difficult. She cleared her throat. "Have you read the papers on the Demon? I don't think anyone is saying good things about him!"

"But a *real* picture," Gemma insisted. At some point, she'd turned to face Spleen in particular. Clearly, she'd noticed the way his eyes were twinkling with interest. And more than that, the way Wiggins' eyes were *not*. "Of what it's like to live with him. Every. Single. Day. The constant fear of having to wake up a bed away from a murderer. To sit next to him in class. To eat breakfast next to someone who has never hesitated to injure a classmate. If you write that article, the headmaster—the *headmistress*, I mean—will have no choice but to expel him!"

Forget the headmistress, Wiggins thought, *its DOE that gets things done these days!*

Spleen stepped forward, entirely enthralled with Gemma's offer. "What can you tell us?"

"Anything," Gemma said. "Everything. Whatever will get him out of here and away from my housemates."

Spleen laughed. The potion, again forgotten at his side, started to bubble ominously. Wiggins inched away from it. Just in case.

"Dear girl," Spleen's glasses fogged over again, "I think this arrangement will benefit the both of us quite nicely."

The smell of flowers was cloying, and Gemma gagged.

Chapter End Notes

next up: Dazai actually does a class assignment for once.

Good and Bad

Chapter Summary

The last piece of the puzzle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What about a rat?"

Snape looked up from his papers, brows furrowed in deep consternation. "Why would you put a rat," he said, cautiously putting his red-ink quill down, "into a potion?"

Dazai shrugged. He dropped a set of doxy eggs into a steaming cauldron, pulling a face when a foul, sulfuric smell burst out of it. "Why would you put any of this into a potion?" he asked sardonically. Then, "Would the rat drown first, or burn alive?" Angel was nowhere to be found these days—*as always!* But Dazai could dream.

By now, Snape had fully turned away from his essays and was staring at Dazai with clear trepidation. "Do not put a rat in your potion," he warned. "It will die. The cauldron will explode. It will be unusable."

"What, you're actually going to drink this? It smells like puke, Sir."

The Girding potion was a second-year staple potion. One of those mandatory basic things every wizard needed to learn—or at least, that's what Hermione would say. Dazai thought it was only good for smelling rightly awful and wasting his time. But he supposed he couldn't argue too terribly. After all, this was the first time in weeks Snape had hung out with him! Not that Dazai wanted to hang around Snape. Because he absolutely did not. But it was good, he thought, because that meant he wasn't upset about the whole mafioso thing.

Anyway. It wasn't really hanging out. It was detention. But Dazai wasn't going to argue semantics. He was in a good mood.

Snape pinched his nose. He did not confirm Dazai's question one way or the other, and only grunted out, "do not stray from the instructions, Problem Child."

Dazai mock-saluted. With his other hand, he threw a handful of dragonfly bits-and-pieces into the potion. It turned blue. Even the steam puffing out of it was a deep sapphire color.

Snape eyed him for another long moment before, evidently satisfied, he turned his focus back to the essays in front of him. They were sixth-year essays, and though Snape had scolded him for it, Dazai had snooped over his shoulder and read some of them. Most of the essays were

marked up and down in red, now. Dazai had told Snape he thought the older kids were pretty stupid—it all seemed very simple to him—and Snape had told to do his own assignments before nitpicking everyone else's. Stalemate.

"You're such a bore, Sir," Dazai told him honestly.

Snape didn't look up from his papers, only grunted.

That wasn't fun at all, Dazai thought. Grumpily, a took a knife from the table and began chopping up a flying seahorse into tiny pieces. The textbook said to make them inch-sized cubes, but Dazai had run the calculations in his head and figured it would brew faster if he made them thinner. So he did. He hoped it might make the potion smell less like a decomposing skunk, too. (It did not.) When Dazai added his first of three seahorses, the smell became unbearable. He coughed and covered his nose.

"Hey, Snape," he coughed through cloth. "Can I do an experiment?"

There was a shine of amusement in his eyes at Dazai's disgusted expression, but it tightened immediately at the suggestion. "Absolutely not."

"Please?" he whined.

"No."

"Pretty please? I'm going to suffocate on the fumes! I'm going to die. It'll be your fault—"

Snape lifted a greasy brow. "No."

Dazai's mouth clamped shut. The rank odor did not dampen. It reminded him plenty of being nearly trampled to death by a mountain troll—twice!—last year. Those things had smelled awful. Like unwashed flesh and mold. So did the Girding potion, although in a very different way. He shifted track, "It's an academic experiment," Dazai tried again, pitching his voice up to sound earnest. "And you can mull it over and everything, then tell me how stupid I am for thinking we could add some cold spring water and lemon flowers to this to make this smell less like death."

Snape blinked. Something shifted in his expression, and he asked slowly, "...what made you think of that combination?"

"That potions book I won from you," Dazai told him.

"The Girding Potion is not in that book."

"No," Dazai hummed, then choked when the smell snuck into his nostrils. *"Er*—it was implied."

"No it wasn't."

"No," Dazai said, "it wasn't. But I got the gist anyhow. What do you say? Is Snape going to finally take that stick out of his ass and let me do something fun?"

Snape shot him a pointed look. "Language."

Dazai covered his mouth—and nose—with his hands.

But rather than berate him again, Snape fell into a mute consideration. He looked at Dazai in that strange way he did, sometimes, when Dazai said or did something he apparently wasn't supposed to. Like when he'd recited the textbook word-for-word, when he'd first cast Motus Subtilis, or when they'd talked potions on the train. It was a face that always had Dazai on edge—just a little.

After a long moment, Snape stood. Dazai watched, wide-eyed and curious, as he walked to the back wall and began sorting through the collection of vials, jars, and boxes stored there. The potion ingredients.

The potion ingredients! Dazai hurried over to him, and Snape caught his eye with a small, almost unnoticeable, smile.

"Spring water," Snape said, passing a clear jar over. Dazai took it. Even with his gloves on, he could feel the icy temperature on his palms. "And..." Snape trailed off as he searched for the lemon flowers.

Dazai looked with him. There were all number of ingredients back here. Dazai had searched through them all, before, during his classes and while making his poisons. Because of that, he found the flowers almost immediately. Lemon flowers were a rare ingredient for potion-making. Not because they had a lot of power, but rather because they had very little. Adding lemon petals to a potion would have so little effect on the brew, you may as well not have added them in the first place. But they did smell nice.

He found the flowers in a brown-paper envelope beside many other small, dried things. Dried-out salamanders in a glass tube, flattened slugs, and a dozen types of flowers beside the lemon. Dazai eyed the other envelopes.

Roses, orchids, foxglove...

Dazai slipped the lemon flowers from the shelf and held it up for Snape to see. "Here we are."

Snape looked up from the next shelf over, where a collection of roots was kept. "Good," he said, squinting down at the thin writing, lemon petals. "Let us test your hypothesis, then. Add them to the Girding potion."

Dazai nodded eagerly and skipped back to the potion.

Snape didn't notice how his fingers trailed behind. Nor when the foxglove vanished from its spot on the shelf, and reappeared in the inner pocket of Dazai's coat. The same slight of hand he used for cheating cards.

The envelope was small, about the size of a card itself. Dazai quickly undid the twine cord keeping it shut, then upended the lemon petals into his palm. Each petal was no larger than a

single joint of his pinky finger. They were white and frail, and smelled faintly sweet. He ground them up with a mortar and pestle.

Snape stood on the other end of the cauldron, nodding approvingly at the process. "Stir that into the water," he said, and Dazai did, "I will use the activation spell." Dazai let him cast the spell without a fuss, because he didn't know the spell himself. Snape twisted his wand in the air. The magic swirled and felt to Dazai a bit like how water tumbled gently down rocks in a stream. With that single curl of magic, the spell was complete. Dazai committed the feeling to memory. Next time, he would cast it himself. Or at least he would make a louder fuss when Snape insisted against him.

Almost immediately, the sweet, floral fragrance sang through the air. It mixed with the potion's vile stench crudely. But when Snape poured the flowers into the brew and stirred twice, the change was instantaneous. The Girding potion took on the flowers' faint sweetness. The vapors no longer had Dazai gagging, but drawing in a pleasant breath, instead. Dazai let out a relieved sigh.

"That was very clever," Snape said, his voice doing something strange over the praise. Dazai never heard Snape doing much praising—usually it was shouting or insulting—so this was probably a very strange experience for him.

Dazai had no pity for it, though, and grinned cockily. "I'm very clever," he said, matter-of-fact. "You should listen to me more often. I'm full of great ideas."

Snape glowered. "You're full of something."

Dazai chuckled.

With the potion breathable once again, Dazai set to completing it. He used incendio—under Snape's watchful gaze—to heat the brew until the cauldron's base was turning a bright red. A full minute passed before the Girding potion turned an olive green. Dazai chirped a happy tune when it was finally complete.

Not sharing in the ecstatic atmosphere even slightly, Snape grunted and put out the flames with a muttered spell. He drew an empty flask from the table and filled it with the sweet-smelling potion. Corking it, he said, "tolerable."

"I thought it was very clever."

"The potion is very clever," he said, holding it up to the light, "your attitude it tolerable." He set it down with a clink and Dazai rolled his eye. He watched as Snape walked back to his desk and reached into the drawer. Without a word, he retrieved a single roll of paper. Dazai leaned forward with interest. The parchment was clean and uncracked. It was clearly new, unlike a lot of the textbooks or pamphlets most staff kept lying about. When Snape unrolled it, revealing the scroll's contents, Dazai gasped.

"No way."

Snape ran his finger down the list of names—passing over *Abbot, Hannah; Bones, Susan; Boot, Terry;* and so on, before finally resting over *Dazai, Osamu.*

He picked up the quill and marked in one of the many blank spots—*100%.*

"No, no, no," Dazai whined, pulling back, "don't give me a grade!"

Snape stared at him like he'd grown a second head. "You would rather fail?"

"It's a part of my charm! Everyone knows I'm a good for nothing, and I'd like to keep it that way."

Now, Snape's expression darkened. "You are not a *good for nothing,"* he stressed, sounding somehow both annoyed and weary at the same time. At Dazai's still pouting face, he huffed, "the Girding potion is a part of your curriculum, and this is a perfect—a more than perfect—brew. You are no exception from the rest of your class, and I will grade you accordingly."

Dazai deflated. He was still staring at the report sheet, a bubble of grief rising up at him upon the death of his drop-out persona, when Snape paused. Then, contemplative, he lifted his quill again and and changed the 100. Dazai didn't have any hope that Snape would be erasing it, but he still found himself gasping when—

"105?!" Dazai gaped. "Snape, come on. What if people think I'm actually smart? I can't have that."

"As I said, more than perfect," Snape said, eyeing him with a look that crinkled amusedly at the edges. Then, he sobered. "Why are you so concerned with appearing intelligent? I should think most brats your age would like to flaunt their brains."

Dazai waved a hand around disarmingly. "Snape doesn't know what he's talking about, as always."

Snape looked like he wanted to spit something back angrily, but he only bit his tongue instead. Eventually, he said with some significance, "Mr. Dazai, you cannot fail your classes."

"What, I'll get expelled?"

"Yes," Snape stressed. "The only reason you were not held back last year was on a technicality. I can assure you this will not work a second time."

Dazai tilted his head. And despite the pinch in his chest, only teasingly asked, "Not even if I kill the basilisk for you? How cruel."

Snape's eyes narrowed into slits. "I told you to stay out of that."

Dazai raised his hands as if to say, *'whatever.'*

Back in the Hell's Hounds office, the twins had drawn a snake on the blackboard with massive, red *X*'s over the eyes. Some time later, Dazai had drawn himself standing over it with a sword. Stabbing it. Spilling red chalk dust all over the rest of the board so no one

could read their earnings report anymore. It was all a very cheerful affair. Somehow, Dazai didn't think Snape would appreciate his enthusiasm.

Snape's returning stare was simmering. "Mr. Dazai," he said. His voice was leaden and severe, and for the first time in a long while, Dazai almost expected a hit to follow.

None did.

Snape only continued to watch him with that stare of his—the one that was both annoyed and worried at once. Then, his expression darkened. "You are a smart boy," he said, ignoring the way Dazai shifted at the genuine praise, "act like it. Unless you want to go home and never return?"

Never return to Hogwarts..?

Dazai would never get to see Hell's Hounds again. Draco. The twins. Blaise.

Wait.

No. That wasn't right.

Dazai would be failing Mori's mission, to do that—which was the most important thing here. Of course.

He shifted, uncomfortable at where his thoughts had gone immediately to. He focused instead on what was more pertinent:

Snape's un-asked question.

Unless you want to go home to the Port Mafia?

Which he did. Of course. But he also wanted to come back to Hogwarts and finish out his mission with the help of his gang.

Snape must have read something on his face, because he sighed a moment later and rubbed at his face tiredly.

Dazai shrugged stiffly. He let out a melodramatic sigh he scarcely felt. "It's too difficult to pass my classes..."

"If you would try—"

"...they're so boring!" Dazai whined.

Snape frowned. "Boring," he echoed.

Dazai nodded. The gesture both confirmed Snape's inquiry and shook loose the coiling in his stomach—as much as anything could, that was.

"The lessons are too easy?" Snape took a stab in the dark. "Do your assignments, and the staff can consider raising you a grade level."

"Just boring," Dazai told him. And that was the truth.

Snape stared at him for a long moment. At first, irritation flickered across his face. But then, his expression morphed into something more contemplative. Assessing. He stared down at Dazai like he was trying to make sense of him. Dazai shifted uncomfortably.

"I don't want to recite textbooks until I die," Dazai explained, eyeing Snape's stare distrustfully. "What's the point of that, anyway? It's just a waste of time."

Dazai's eye flicked to the Girding potion. Snape followed his gaze. It smelled sweet. Honeyed. Like tea.

Now, Snape considered them both—the potion and Dazai—for an extended moment. He drew in a breath, probably enjoying that the air didn't stink of eggs and waste. When he closed his mouth, his lips were flat. His gaze settled eventually on Dazai alone. "What would it take for you to do an assignment?" he asked.

"Huh?"

Snape's nose turned up. "What must an assignment include for it not to bore you?" he asked again. And he sounded serious. Not annoyed, or bantering. But like he genuinely wondered what Dazai wanted.

Dazai couldn't tell Snape, *'There's nothing I want,'* because he only knew that for certain because the Mirror of Erised had shown him it. *Nothing.*

When Dazai didn't answer for a moment except to blink, Snape's expression turned briefly grim. "Nothing violent," he said with some trepidation.

He knows about the Port Mafia, Dazai reminded himself. Snape's demeanor was so severe, now, that he could only be thinking along those lines. Because of this, Dazai didn't make a comment about brewing poisons even though he'd definitely considered it. "I don't know," he said. The words were softer—more honest—than he'd intended, and he caught himself briefly off-guard to hear it. He shook himself, and said more firmly, "Nothing. I don't want to do homework, so I won't."

"Take this seriously," Snape told him. His eyes flicked briefly again to the corked potion. Then, he said—in a voice very much like the words were fighting him, "If you have more free reign to experiment, would that entice you?"

"Like adding a rat to my potions?"

"No." Snape gave him a significant look, but it was softened thoughtfully at the edges. A look Dazai was really only familiar with when they spoke over tea. They weren't drinking tea, now. Hadn't, since Winter Break. "Clever experiments," he said.

"Like the lemon flowers," Dazai said, drawing in a breath of delicately sweet air.

Snape nodded.

Dazai considered that.

The obstinate part of him wanted to laugh and grumble something about flunking out. But there was something else, too. A part of him that bubbled with tiny excitement at the opportunity to do something new. Something that hadn't been tested and proven a thousand times by wizard students all over the world.

Something interesting.

Dazai carefully kept all of this from showing on his face, but somehow, Snape caught it anyway. The corners of his lips turned up very slightly—Snape's approximation of a full-blown smile, Dazai imagined. He neatened the sheet of paper in front of him and tapped one of the blank spots beside Dazai's name. "The Wideeye potion," he said, "how would you like to change it?"

For the first time since arriving at Hogwarts, Dazai found himself a little excited at the notion of doing homework.

-

Minerva stood over Albus' desk.

Over *her* desk.

She wasn't especially superstitious. Superstitions were different, for magic users—those who knew curses and jinxes could be real, if given power. And there was no magic keeping her from sitting, now. It was rightfully her desk. She'd need to sit if she wanted to get any work done.

But it still felt like Albus' desk. Like she was tresspassing.

The baubles and trinkets on the desk were untouched. They would be in Minerva's way the second she sat, but still. She didn't touch them. Albus had them arranged in a particular order, she was sure. To move them felt disrespectful. And Minerva was only interim Headmistress. Albus would be coming back. Once everything finally blew over. And surely, he would be peeved to find his Rememberall tucked in a drawer and not out where he'd left it.

Minerva sighed.

Her first order of business was not cleaning Albus' office—for it was certainly still Albus' to her.

No, her first job was getting Albus back.

Beside the magical knicknacks on the desk, was a single letter. The envelope had been cut open with a quick swipe of magic. Emblazoned across the page: *DP.*

Daily Prophet.

Minerva had written them promptly, right after she'd woken to find Albus gone and *her* name on the metal plate where Albus' should be. They'd only written back now. She'd thrown the letter open in a haste. When she'd first written the Daily Prophet, she'd hoped to put swift end to all the drama. Tell them the truth that Albus, absurdly, would not.

"The situation of the petrifications is a complex one. As acting Headmistress, I would like to request an interview with one of your reporters in order to clear up the many misunderstandings that have been flooding the Daily Prophet recently," she'd written, to the point. *"Haste, however, is of the essence. For this, I shall give a brief overview of the situation that you may begin publishing soon."*

Soon. So the public could understand Albus' side of things and Hogwarts could have him back.

Or so Minerva had hoped.

The Daily Prophet had written back only a short response. No more than a few sentences long, to contrast the three pages of information Minerva had sent them:

"Thank you for the information, Minerva," Barnabas Cuffe had written. *"I'm sure we may find some use for it. However, the Daily Prophet—wizard society by large—has seen much growth since the Demon Students story took hold. The removal of Albus Dumbledore, the formation of DOE, the recruitment of more capable medical staff at Hogwarts—to name only a few. Perhaps it is best to let things continue as they are."*

Nothing more.

They would not clear Dazai's name. They would not encourage the return of Albus. Did not want Albus to return.

Albus' words echoed in her mind, *"It's a symbol,"* he'd said, *"Everything that is wrong with the magical community."*

Minerva cursed. She wasn't sure where the blame should fall. Albus, for letting things get so out of hand. Herself, for not pushing. The Demon Student, who's controversy was now so out of control there was no stopping it.

Perhaps, she thought a little guiltily, *it would be best if Mr. Dazai killed the basilisk. At least then, the Daily Prophet couldn't simply ignore her information. They would have to say something about Dazai's innocence.*

...Right?

She sighed. Minerva's eyes fell to the Albus' chessboard.

She'd never understood how he played. She had sat with him, on occasion, while he rearranged it. Even watching him move each piece, one at a time, she'd not been able to understand. But Albus fussed over it more and more in the months preceding his dismissal. And especially when talking over his plans. His elusive third party. Minerva couldn't shake the thought that the pieces on this board represented something more. His plans taking place. His schemes. And still, she didn't understand it. Didn't know what Albus' goal had been, with all this. If somehow his dismissal, too, was intentional. She crossed the room to the board, eyes tracing on the Daily Prophet letter for a long moment before finally flicking up to a white rook. She hesitated a long moment before finally deciding to pick it up.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Come in," she called.

For the barest moment, she imagined Albus walking back in through the door. His impenetrable plan continuing to unfurl in a way she could not predict.

But when the door swung open, it was a head of fiery red hair gingerly poking through instead. "Ma'am?" Charles Weasley asked.

Minerva drew in a breath. When she released it, she was smiling tightly at him. "Come in. Thank you for coming on such short notice, Mr. Weasely."

He made a face. "Just Charlie, please. Mr. Weasely feels too much like being your student again. No offense."

"None taken." Her smile became a little more genuine, but the tension in her chest made it difficult to embrace fully. "You never were much for transfiguration, Charlie."

"No, I wasn't," he laughed. Then, Charlie was sobering up. Minerva felt herself doing the same. "But I'm not here to rehash the good old times," he said. He looked around the room, seeing Albus' things strewn about the room in that particular order of his. Eventually, his eyes came to rest, somberly, on the white rook in Minerva's hands. "I can't believe he's actually..."

Minerva couldn't believe it, either.

"I mean," Charlie rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, "I always thought Dumbledore was infallible."

"That was his intention, I suspect," *A symbol for magical society. Something strong to protect us.* Minerva shook her head. "After the wizarding war, people needed a figure like Albus more than ever."

Charlie hemmed. "The war is over, now."

Minerva held her tongue. That was another thing the Daily Prophet had refused to publish, despite her insistence. *The Death Eaters are back. Quirrell was one of them, and Mr. Dazai saved the school from him.*

"But that's not what you called me for," Charlie continued, only shooting Minerva a furrowed look at her hesitation. "The dragon."

"Egg," Minerva said, "Apparently."

Charlie frowned. He set a hefty bag down on one of the chairs, and it thudded loudly. "It's a dragon *egg?* I thought Dumbledore said it was older, when he wrote me."

"It's name is Egg," she told him. "Or so I've been told."

Charlie laughed nervously. "Strange name," he said.

"Named by a strange boy," Minerva said candidly. At Charlie's asking look, she said, "this doesn't leave this room."

"You're making me nervous, now," he said, looking just that. But he only pursed his lips, and said, "I only want to take care of the dragon—of Egg. Whatever else is going on is your business."

Unfortunately.

Minerva had spent years working under Albus, thinking up all the ways she wanted to fix Hogwarts. From hiring a counselor to switching up their curriculum. But now that she actually had that power, she was feeling... Trapped. Immobilized by everything else that was going on. A bit like she'd been set up to fail before she'd even gotten a chance to sit behind the damn desk. With a narrow breath, Minerva set the white rook down with an audible click in the middle of the board, uncertain where else to put it that it would abide by whatever rules Albus' game followed. "The dragon belongs to Mr. Dazai."

Charlie blinked once. "Yeah, I read that in the paper."

"It likes him," she reiterated. "I didn't think that was possible."

"It isn't," Charlie dropped his hand, neck red where he'd been nervously rubbing. "Not generally, at least. He must have hatched Egg himself."

"He claims not to have."

Charlie hummed. "Well, it is illegal."

That is was. Though Minerva doubted something like legality would slow Dazai down at all. The boy was muggle mafia, after all. He probably breathed law-breaking. And he certainly had a penchant for trouble-making. "Forget about that for now," she said, worrying her brow, "I just want the dragon taken care of."

Charlie's eyes narrowed. "Removed to a dragon sanctuary," he corrected.

She waved a hand. "Semantics."

Charlie didn't look to agree. But he only sniffed, and expounded, "Well, if Mr. Dazai hatched the dragon, it's possible it sees him as family. Though that seems unlikely."

"Rubeus suggested it might be bonded to him," Minerva said.

Now, Charlie blinked looking utterly bewildered. "Really?" He sounded excited. More excited than Minerva felt about having a feral dragon loose in her school. "That would be incredible. I might have to meet Mr. Dazai, if that's the case."

It was Minerva's turn to stare in surprise.

Charlie coughed at the attention. "It's... really impressive, if they've bonded."

Minerva shook her thoughts loose. "Mr. Dazai is the Demon Student," she said the words slowly, certain Charlie must have not realized. "You want to meet him?"

She could hardly believe what she was hearing. The only time people ever wanted to speak with Dazai was to interrogate him—Minerva wasn't blind to the fascination Wiggins and Spleen had for the boy. But Charlie seemed to be bouncing with an entirely different kind of excitement.

"Yes," Charlie said, entirely earnest. At Minerva's narrowing eyes, he added, "Whatever is going on with the. The Demon Student. Is really none of my business. And I've heard enough from my kid brothers to know he's more *rascal* than he is *killer*."

Minerva wanted to smile at that. She did.

But she didn't really *know*, did she?

Port Mafia, it echoed in her head again, now. Always. *If you'd told Albus about the Port Mafia...*

Minerva forced her eyes not to stray to the chess board. The white rook obnoxiously sitting in the very middle. The black queen fallen on its side.

Charlie cleared his throat a little awkwardly. Then, he explained, "A dragon bond is more than just trust between master and dragon. It's a dragon's way of saying you're family. And since dragons tend to be very solitary and violent creatures, the don't bond often. I've only ever worked with one dragon that bonded, before. And that was a very incredible circumstance. Dragons don't bond with just anyone, either. They have a kind of sixth-sense for people."

"A sixth-sense?"

Charlie nodded. Suddenly, his open expression darkened into something very serious. Minerva felt herself matching at once. "A dragon knows who's good and bad. They can just tell. It's actually a source of much research in the dragon-studying community—"

Minerva interrupted, "What does that mean? *Good and bad."*

Charlie's hand rose back to his neck, embarrassed. "Sorry. It means a dragon won't ever bond with someone like He Who Must Not Be Named. No matter how much you dote on a dragon, if you're a bad soul, it won't ever bond to you." He met Minerva's eyes head on. "I'll need to see them for myself to be sure, but if a dragon has really bonded with Mr. Dazai..."

He's not a bad person.

He can't be a bad person.

Charlie's severe stare seemed to impress this upon the air.

Could it be? The demon at the center of everyone's hate a good person? The *mafioso* a good person? Some emotion burned in Minerva's gut. Hope or worry, she wasn't sure.

"Good or bad as anyone can be, that is," Charlie was continuing. "No one is *all* good or *all* bad."

Minerva sighed. That was true. Deal with Albus long enough, and that fact became undeniable.

Good or bad.

Dazai, Minerva couldn't say for sure.

But the basilisk. That was undeniably bad. Thinking this, she asked him, "What do you know about basilisks?"

Charlie blinked at the nonsequiter. "It's a very distant relative of the common dragon." His expression pinched. "I'm not much help on that front, I'm afraid."

Minerva sighed. She hadn't expected much, but she had hoped...

"They don't bond like dragons. They're wild animals, really." A nervous bead of sweat dotted his brow. "It's not so much my area of expertise. But I can say..." He trailed off, looking contemplatively out the window. The gilded pheonix cage was gone. It had been one of the few things that vanished alongside Albus. Minerva felt a sense of foreboding come over her. "You can't exactly fight off a basilisk. Certainly not a full grown one. Even a full team of magical zoologists..." he glanced back to her, his expression tight like he was afraid he might overstep. "Ma'am. Hogwarts really should be evacuated, if there's a basilisk here."

Minerva did not respond. Instead, she asked, "can you find it?"

"The basilisk?" He asked warily. A trill of fear pitched his voice oddly.

"The dragon," she corrected, shaking her head negative.

"Oh." Charlie's shoulders were a line. He frowned. "Probably. None of the staff found them?" When Minerva shook her head gravely, he patted his bag. It made a rough sound like heavy boxes wrapped in upholstery. Minerva didn't know what kind of equipment dragon researchers used, but she suspected she was about to find out. "I can give the school a look

around," he said. "But I wouldn't worry too much, Miss McGonagall. If Egg is bonded, she shouldn't be anymore of a threat than Mr. Dazai is."

Minerva's expression must have done something concerned, because Charlie chuckled.

"Like I said," he told her, withdrawing something with the distinctly bloody stench of meat from his bag, "that boy's a rascal. Not a killer."

-

'You're a killer.'

The ink from Dazai's quill stained a precise line through the diary. He rolled a sickle between his fingers while he waited for a response. The coin trick was more difficult with gloves on, so he'd forgone them.

'So are you, Dazai,' Riddle responded.

'Am I?"

Riddle's script was as impassive as ever. *'Ginny told me about Quirrell.'*

Dazai wondered what else Ginny had told Riddle, but did not ask. Getting distracted would only slow things down. And there was an itchiness just below his skin—prickling. The same irritation that had blistered in his brain last year, just before he'd finally decided: *today. Today I'm going to steal the Philosopher's Stone.*

'Good for her,' Dazai replied blithely. Then, accusatory, he wrote, *'50 years ago.'*

'I'm to assume you found the basilisk?'

'I found the girl you killed. Myrtle. She's a ghost.'

A pause.

'Pity for her.'

'If I ask why,' Dazai wrote, *'are you just going to give me some nonsense about blood purity again?'*

Riddle's answer came very quickly. *'It is not nonsense. Those without pure blood have no right to weild magic. They defile it with their dirty blood. They—'* He wrote so fast and fervent that the letters were jagged. They seemed to smudge beneath an invisible palm in a haste to write everything down. Riddle just kept writing, oblivious to how illegible his script was becoming. Dazai only skimmed it. This wasn't useful at all.

Instead, he turned it to a blank page. If Riddle was still ranting, he wouldn't know it anymore.

'You sure were a troublemaker when you were a human,' Dazai said, remembering what Myrtle told them and extrapolating from there. *'How did you become bound to a diary?'*

It was the only question left in the whole basilisk dilemma—aside from the ever more pertinent, *how am I going to kill it?*

Riddle. He'd been a boy, once. He'd lorded his pureblood supremacy ideals over the Hogwarts students of fifty-years ago. Was the heir of Slytherin apparent. Spoke parseltongue and killed Myrtle. Now, he was a diary.

It was that last bit that stumped Dazai, and he couldn't stand being stumped. A diary possessed by Lucius before Dazai had collected it for himself. A smaller piece to the growing puzzle that was Mori's plan.

'Curious boy,' was all Riddle said.

Dazai flipped the sickle into his palm, rolled his wrist, and flicked it between his fingers. It stung, where Dazai had cut tiny lines into index, middle, and ring fingers a few days prior. But he didn't fumble the motion.

'We are very alike, you and I,' Riddle wrote, apropos of nothing.

The coin faced Dazai—heads—and Riddle—tails.

'I'm not a pure-blood lunatic,' Dazai told him, *'like you.'*

'Of course. Unfortunate,' Riddle's ink was dark and thick, like he'd forced a quill down into the pages with too much pressure. *'But neither am I.'*

"Not a pure blood, or not a lunatic?" Dazai mused out loud to himself. But what he wrote was, *'Be straight with me, or I'll burn you.'*

'You still need answers.'

'I have what I need,' Dazai said, because it was true. It was only a lingering curiosity that kept him writing now. That aching emptiness in his schemes where Riddle's origins should be. A mystery.

Riddle's writing paused to consider that. Then, *'We're the same, you and I.'*

The coin dropped from Dazai's hand and landed tails—just like he'd expected it to.

'Strange children,' Riddle was writing, *'who don't belong anywhere. Killers and liars. Ginny and I never spoke so closely of our secrets. Even thinking I was nothing more than a spell, she never told me everything. She trusted me only just enough to let me in. Not like you and I.'*

Dazai's eyes narrowed down at the diary.

Strange children, Riddle had written. Which meant...

'You were bound to the diary not long after the basilisk incident, weren't you?' Still a young boy. Dazai's skin prickled not just where he'd cut it. Everywhere.

Riddle's writing was sloping. *'See? We understand one another. One and the same.'*

'What happened to you?'

'This world is no place for children like you and I,' Riddle told him. Dazai imagined a boy—his age, about—gripping a fist tightly in his robes. Sitting just the two of them in the Hound's office. Stained glass shattering light across their backs. Then, Dazai blinked, and it was only him alone in the office with a book laid open on his desk. *'I sought to change that.'*

Dazai realized suddenly that he'd been holding his breath. Riddle's words feeling oddly like a wound. *'By becoming a diary?'*

'By changing the world,' Riddle said, *'so that it might belong to people like us.'*

People like *us*. Dazai couldn't deny it. Had felt it from their very first interaction: Riddle and he were of the same ilk.

Riddle, trapped in the pages of his book.

Dazai, trapped in...

He closed his eyes and centered his magic. It lifted in his stomach, and up through his chest. Motus Subtilis blew a gentle breeze across Riddle's pages, a light fluttering sound announcing the spell's success.

'We should join sides,' Riddle wrote, the words shifting in the breeze. *'In fixing this world.'*

Dazai did nothing but stare down at the diary for several long seconds. It was long enough that Riddle must have known Dazai was taken aback. But Riddle didn't say anything. The blank line where Riddle's response could have been belied nothing of his thoughts.

Something tickled at Dazai's mind.

This felt... familiar.

He ran their conversation again through his head—rereading where the ink was still visible and imagining where it had washed away. Why did it feel like he'd done this before?

Haltingly, Dazai penned, *'And which side would that be?'* So focused on Riddle's response, Dazai's spell sputtered out in a whistle.

'The side of blood purity,' he wrote, *'the side for children like us.'*

This wasn't the first time Dazai had been invited to join a cause. One year prior, Voldemort had asked the same. *"But seeing as we will shortly be joining sides,"* he'd said, *"you will call*

me Lord Voldemort."

Voldemort had only been a ghost on Quirrell's skull, then.

Dazai's eye settled on the book that contained Riddle's spirit.

An partnership was offered there, boldly in the center of the page.

A sense of déjà vu washed over Dazai when he asked, *'And if I refuse?'*

"This is not a request," Voldemort had said.

'I'm only a diary, Dazai,' Riddle answered.

Dazai pulled on his magic again. Motus Subtilis was easy, once you figured it out. He narrowed his focus on it—the barest of vibrations in the air. Like a scalpel. A whistling sound picked up around him as the air molecules began to vibrate ever so slightly. It sounded like a storm wind caught behind glass. *'Why are you in a diary, Riddle?'* Dazai asked again, something dark itching at the corner of his senses. There was a notable pause. While Dazai waited—for he could do nothing more than wait—he flexed Motus Subtilis in the air. It vibrated the air and hummed. The longer Riddle made him wait, the higher the pitch became. A long, screaming dog whistle—

Egg slammed a pile of dead rats on his desk.

Dazai shot to his feet. The chair clattered with him.

His spell cut off immediately and the pitchy whistle vanished from the air as a breeze. "Egg," he said, a little breathless, "don't just barge in. You'll give me a heart attack, and... actually, that's not a bad way to die."

Egg snorted out a pluff of smoke.

A second later, Featherbrain more delicately landed beside Egg. She set down only one rat on the desk, adding it to the larger and bloodier pile Egg had delivered. Then, she preened the feathers of one wing.

"Getting along, I see..." Dazai said, eyeing the dragon and owl both. For once, they weren't squabbling with one another. Having space to free her wings must have calmed Egg down. Or maybe they were just finally past the getting-to-know-you period.

Featherbrain chirped proudly, and Dazai's attention was promptly brought to his... gift. Half a dozen dead rats were clumped on the desk. Two of them had fallen directly on Riddle and were now bleeding out over the pages. Dazai brushed them off. The rats were all a dark brown color—none of them wearing the pitch black fur Angel did. When he moved the rats, they made a gross, squelching sound and left a smear of blood over the last thing Dazai had written, *'Why are you in a diary, Riddle?'* But with the red blood spilled over it, the words seemed only to read, *'Why — Riddle?'* Only Featherbrain's kill was clean. She had always been a precise hunter. There was only the faintest trace of red spotting her rat's throat. Egg's, however, were clawed over, bit into, and bleeding all over the desk.

Feral dragon, Dazai reminded himself with a tired huff. He slowly lowered himself back into the chair. Egg and Featherbrain watched him expectantly. "I'm not going to thank you," Dazai told them, and they both slumped defeatedly. "I don't want dead things on my desk."

Featherbrain chirped something, and Egg grumbled a response.

Oh. So they were talking now. Why did Dazai get the feeling that this could only spell trouble? "Please behave," he said when they shared another exchange of grunts and pips. "I only have—" he paused to lift Riddle before a growing pool of blood could stain his cover, "—so much time to babysit you all."

'...Dazai?' Just underneath the smear of blood, Riddle had smally asked, *'is everything okay?'*

"It's—" Dazai had to shove all the dead rats onto the floor to make space. Even then, the corner of the diary soaked through, *'not mine,'* he wrote was the book was settled and the quill returned to his hand.

Dazai watched as the evidence of their conversation erased itself. The blood, however, remained. The page was permanently stained red.

Riddle drew a tiny arrow in the bottom corner of the page. Dazai flipped to the next page, then several more times when he realized the blood had stained at least a dozen pages more. The paper had already begun sticking together where the blood was drying.

Finally, Dazai found a page that was unstained. At the top, Riddle had asked, *'all that blood, and the basilisk will come find you.'*

Dazai stared at that for several seconds. Then, his eyes flitted back to Egg and Featherbrain. He could no longer see the pile of rats where they'd been pushed onto the floor, but he could smell it. And hear the buzzing of flies starting to gather.

Featherbrain chirped a question.

Dazai couldn't feel the rushing magic of the basilisk around. But then again, he couldn't feel much of anything in the office. The room's magic made it too hard to tell what was spelled and what wasn't. Instead, his eye drifted to the blackboard. The drawing of him slaying the basilisk with a cartoonishly large sword, surrounded by notes from his subordinates:

go, dazai, go!!!!

Please don't encourage his bad behavior.

don't be such a stick in the mud, minoe!

This is serious!

hey, Ron had written, *do you really have a sword, dazai??*

When Dazai turned back to the impenetrable, sloping way that Riddle wrote, he found himself blank-faced. Staring. Dropping his shoulders into a hunch. The sun was still high

enough in the sky to crack red light across the room and Dazai's back. Riddle was right. The amount of blood spilling out all the rats was comparable to the amount Dazai had bled himself in Pomfrey's office. It was only a matter of time before the basilisk appeared.

Dazai briefly entertained the idea of letting it come. Of killing it here and now. But he reasoned himself against it. The Chamber of Secrets was so close, he could almost touch it. Anyhow, he didn't need the corpse of a giant snake being found in his secret hideout. (Emphasis of the *secret.)*

Dazai also considered just letting the basilisk petrify him. Either No Longer Human would save him, or it wouldn't. But he'd be leaving behind evidence of his wrongdoings, that way. And he couldn't have that.

Dazai rolled his wrist, skin pulling under his bandages. "You two," he said. Egg and Featherbrain both perked up. "I have a job for you."

Featherbrain chirped happily, briefly taking to the air to do a twirly swoop. Egg's tail thwacked against the desk.

"Take those somewhere else," he paused, briefly considering, "near the Hufflepuff dorms. Do you know where that is?"

Dazai didn't. But Featherbrain made a trilling noise that might have been a *yes*.

She landed with a *plop!* on Dazai's head. Staggered, he fell under her weight. She started pulling at his eye bandages and he had to swat her off. "Quickly," he told them, "I want it bloody when you get there."

Egg leaned forward, reaching her snout towards Dazai's still outstretched hand. He hovered it just over her nose, not quite touching. Egg made a distressed noise.

"Do a good job, and you can have all the pats you want."

Immediately, Egg let out an excited noise, eyes shining happily. She hopped off the desk with a *thud!* When she flew up again, her maw was stuffed full of dead rats. Blood rolled down her chin and splatted on the the floor. Featherbrain flew over to her, and they started squabbling over the rats. After a short, squawking fight, Featherbrain came away with two rats hanging from her beak by the tails.

"Don't get caught," Dazai said.

Then they flew up into the rafters and vanished.

Dazai stared after them for a long moment. The silence they'd left in their wake felt, somehow, oppressive. The desk was still blotted over with blood, smelling of iron. Pressed against his knee a drawer, where an envelope of foxglove was hidden. The couch—Dazai's bed—looked stiff and uninviting from the distance. And the mirror on the wall... Dazai didn't look at it, absurdly afraid that it might show no reflection at all.

Red light sparkled over everything.

'Tell me about becoming a diary,' Dazai said, *'and in exchange, I'll tell you what I'm planning next.'*

Riddle drew in a tiny circle, clearly contemplating something.

'*You're right,'* Dazai told him, thinking of the bloody rats he'd just sent off. Thinking of the basilisk he'd just sent off. *'We do have a lot in common.'*

Something in Dazai's words must have warmed Riddle, because a second later, he was writing again.

Writing everything.

'I was pursuing immortality,' Riddle told him. *'If I want to fix this awful world, I can't die yet. I can't ever die. That's what I was thinking when I made my first horcrux.'*

The air in the Hound's office was stale. It smelled of iron.

Immortality. There it was again.

Just like last year, with the Philosopher's Stone. The concept was as horrifying as it was inconceivable to Dazai. Just thinking the word—*immortality*—had Dazai feeling bile rise up in his throat. He squeezed his hands into fists, and the cuts marking his fingers stung. The pain pulled him back.

'By taking the life of another,' Riddle continued to explain, *'and performing a certain spell, the human soul can be divided. A soul in multiple pieces can't ever be destroyed. Not really. You would have to kill both pieces to unbind the soul from the mortal realm. To keep the soul safe, it is transferred into another object. That object is called a horcrux.'*

'Like a diary,' Dazai said, fingers tracing over the paper. It did not nullify under his touch because it wasn't a spell. It was a piece of a human.

'Like a diary,' Riddle confirmed.

'Or,' Dazai wrote, *'a person.'*

'I suppose. Perhaps.'

Dazai steadied his quill. *'Voldemort.'*

There was a pause. A long pause.

'Why do you mention that name, Dazai?'

'Why do you think?'

Because Voldemort had a horcrux; a piece of himself in Quirrell's skull, Dazai thought, *because I think you might be...*

Then, Riddle said, *'clever boy.'* It wasn't the first time Riddle had called Dazai that. It wasn't even the first time he'd been called that today. But somehow, this time felt different. Snake-like. *'I am Lord Voldemort,'* Riddle said, *'or, a part of me is.'*

'The rest of your soul,' Dazai said. Or however many other pieces of it there were. Because wasn't foolish enough to think Riddle had only divided his soul twice.

'The rest of me is off doing what must be done,' Riddle told him, *'to make this world belong to us. Lord Voldemort is an anagram for my full name—Tom Marvolo Riddle. I always wanted Voldemort to be a symbol for people like us. A symbol of change.'*

The rats' blood, which had stained the desk and Riddle irreparably, clung to Dazai's hands, then pooled and dried under his nails. He pulled the knife from his coat and flicked it open, beginning to pick to dirt from each nail one at a time. He started with the right pinky finger. Flecks of brown and red dandruff snowed out. *'I met another piece of your soul last year. He's dead.'*

'Is that so?' Riddle didn't seem bothered. Flecks of blood sprinkled down over him.

'I killed him,' Dazai wrote.

Riddle's writing paused. Then, *'What will you do with me? With this part of me?'*

Before him sat a diary containing all of Lord Voldemort's thoughts and memories from childhood. Dazai would be a fool to throw all that away. He wondered, in a distant sort of way, if Mori already knew about the horcrux. If he had always known.

At Dazai's silence, Riddle asked, *'friend?'*

Dazai blinked down at it. *'Friend? That's awfully familiar.'*

'People like us will always be alone, if we don't find one another,' Riddle said. *'Killers. Children hated by the world. Children who hate the world in turn. You could tell me anything, and I could never persecute you for it, because we are one and the same. Two sides of the same coin.'*

Dazai stared down at the diary. Felt the blood dry on his fingertips.

'I don't want to live forever,' Dazai said stiffly.

'Then don't,' Riddle wrote. In a square of red light, *'Just live for now. Just live with me.'*

Egg and Featherbrain left the dead rats in the Hufflepuff boys' dorm. Dazai knew, because that's where they found the petrified body of Cedric Diggory the following morning.

Chapter End Notes

next up: The Chamber of Secrets (part 1)

The Basilisk

Chapter Summary

Into the Chamber of Secrets!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The meeting began just after lunch, when Dazai tapped a piece of white chalk to the blackboard and announced, "Alright, gang. Listen up."

"Ooh," Fred hummed. He leaned over into George's ear, "our boss is in rare form today!"

George waved his arms wildly overhead. "Sir, yes, sir!"

The Gryffindors had been easy to round up for an impromptu meeting. Dazai sat with them in the Great Hall now, after all. A few casual mentions of, 'meeting up in the usual spot,' was enough to rally Fred, George, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione without rousing the suspicions of anyone else. Though Percy had still watched the exchange with unconcealed trepidation.

"What's the plan, Dazai?" Blaise asked. Draco sat beside him, a stiff square of shoulder and bone. Those two had been a little more difficult to round up, if only because they sat so far apart. But Blaise was ever on the same page as Dazai, and a few searching gazes over the crowd of students had Blaise nodding. He'd understood Dazai's request to meet with only a short look. Blaise continued to unashamedly be Dazai's favorite.

"Hold on," Ron said, raising a hand. Angel was sitting on Ron's shoulder, looking like an uncomfortable bundle of bones and fur no matter how he sat. His eyes were beady little things. When all eyes turned to him, Ron pointed. "What is she doing here?"

As one, the entire room turned to face—

Pansy scowled. "Mind your own business, blood traitor."

Ron spluttered angrily and the twins glowered at her. But it was Hermione who shot to her feet. Rage bubbled up over her expression. Her mouth opened to spit out, "You—!"

"Calm down, children," Dazai said before they could start fighting for real. He tapped the board again a few times until they stopped bristling like angry dogs. And it was only after Hermione, reluctant and with a petulant frown, sat back down, that he said, "no fighting, or I'll kick you out of the operation. Which in some mafias is basically a death sentence!"

Draco choked. Blaise patted him on the back several times, until Draco was only staring blearily at Dazai from his spot on the sofa.

"This isn't a mafia," Ron said plainly.

"Very true!" Dazai said. "Gold star for Ron."

Ron and Pansy both gave him looks like he'd lost his mind. Dazai barrelled onward. On the blackboard, he wrote:

Team 1

Right below it, the drawing of the basilisk had been partially erased, leaving behind a snake-like smudge. Dazai wrote his own name in bold letters, followed by Blaise and Draco.

"Team one is going to—"

"Hold on," Pansy interjected. Dazai turned a raised brow onto her. "Where's my name?"

"I don't want you here," he told her candidly.

Pansy didn't look impressed. She looked even less impressed when the twins had to smother their laughter into one another's shoulders.

Dazai sighed. Sluggishly, like his hand was being dragged by some cosmic force outside his control, he wrote an incredibly unfelt '*Pansy I guess'* just below Draco's name.

"You guess?" Pansy folded her arms.

"I guess," Dazai said with a nod. "Unfortunately."

He looked around the room, meeting each of his Hounds' eyes once each. The twins were still snickering by the desk. Ginny sat with Ron and Hermione, who were both glaring daggers at Pansy—who in true form had yet to stop challenging Dazai with every single breath. She was standing furthest away from everyone else. Isolated.

Meanwhile, Blaise and Draco sat aside on the sofa. They were the only two people here, aside from Dazai himself, with all the pieces. The Port Mafia. Lucius. The diary. But still not the full truth. That was for Dazai alone. (Well. Dazai, Mori, and Riddle, he supposed.) Once he was sure there would be no further objections, Dazai continued as though Pansy had never spoken at all, "Team one," he said, "is going to kill the basilisk. Team two—" he started writing.

"Woah, woah, woah!" Ron interrupted again. Because Dazai couldn't catch a break. "Don't just gloss over that, mate!"

Dazai's writing trailed off part-way through writing Fred's name. He turned over his shoulder to blink tiredly at Ron. *"Hm?"*

"You—the basilisk! You're just going to walk up to it and kill it? No way it's that simple!"

Angel, looking just as fed-up with the yelling as Dazai was, hopped down from Ron's shoulder. He landed silently on the couch, then the floor, before scampering over to the desk. He vanished for a few seconds before reappearing on the desk's surface.

"Ron is right, Dazai," Hermione said, a little warily. "The basilisk is maybe the most dangerous creature in all the magical world! Don't you have a plan? An action list?"

Blaise glanced at her. "Dazai always has a plan."

Dazai grinned. Then, he went back to the task of writing names. "Team two," he declared. This time, he talked right over Ron's oncoming interjection. "Will be making sure Team One doesn't get caught. We'll need a good distraction. Or several distractions." He finished writing their names on the board—starting with Fred, rolling through all of Dazai's other pet Weasleys, and ending with Hermione.

Ginny raised her hand.

Dazai waited for her to speak. When she didn't, he pointed to her. "Yes, Ginny?" He asked, feeling amusedly like a professor.

Ron snorted.

"What does that entail, exactl?"

"I'll leave that up to you all," he said with a significant glance to the twins. Those two were the best distractions. Dazai's pranks and chaos. "Just keep the staff busy. If they realize their big bad Demon Student has gone missing, we'll have an incident on our hands. I'd rather not have to deal with that."

Hermione nodded like that made sense. "Professor Lockhart especially," she told her team. "We should find him before he gets any ideas."

"Like stealing Dazai's thunder?"

"Yeah. You know how Lockhart has it out for our Snakey!"

Draco scoffed disbelievingly. "You think that guy can actually kill the basilisk himself?"

The twins shrugged. They didn't look to believe it anymore than Draco did. All the more reason to keep an eye on Lockhart, Dazai thought. People were most dangerous when they were out of options and desperate.

"Of course not. But how does Dazai intend to kill the basilisk? He isn't exactly a pro-wizard," Hermione hedged. "No offense."

"He's getting better," Blaise said.

And Dazai was. Spells came easier and easier by the day. But Hermione was right, too. "All part of my plan," he wiggled his fingers meaningfully. "Don't worry about it. Just focus on keeping Team Two from getting themselves expelled."

She puffed up, a look of grave importance coming over her. "I will!"

Dazai nodded. He wrote on the board,

distract staff

watch lockhart

"Lockfart," Fred snickered to Geroge.

dont get in trouble

"...or I'll have to bail you out. And, as it happens, I don't have a ton of sway right now."

Dazai stepped back to inspect the blackborard like it was a piece of art. The smudged remains of drawings and conversations made the whole thing very messy. As for the list—

Dazai frowned. Then, leaning forward, he added a thoughtful,

Percy

"Percy?" The Weasleys seemed to all say at once.

Dazai settled his gaze on the twins, who were frowning at the board with deep consternation. "What do you want with him?"

"Oh! We keeping an eye on Perc, too?"

"Yeah, that guys been snooping all over the place lately!"

"Don't worry Boss. We've got him."

Dazai shook his head. The twins spluttered to a blinking stop. "If you run into trouble," he told them. Dazai made a specific look to Hermione, as the most responsible one present. "Go bother Percy. He'll help. Probably." It was either that, or Percy's patience for Dazai's antics would finally run dry. In which case, they would all get expelled. Together. Which was a thought Dazai probably should have been more concerned with than he actually was.

He turned to face them, planting the blackboard fully at his back. "Questions?"

Several hands shot up.

Dazai sighed, tired before the game had even begun.

-

"That's really where the basilisk is?" Draco asked as they walked.

Blaise had taken the lead, on Dazai's request. He'd walked them down a series of very different halls and stairways than Dazai had taken last time, but the end result was the same. Dazai once again thanked his lucky stars that his subordinates knew how to navigate Hogwarts. Had he been leading the way to the girl's condemned bathroom, they'd have been lost ages ago.

"Yup," Dazai told him. Blaise indicated a turn, and when they rounded the corner a familiar bathroom door came into view. Dazai picked up the pace a little.

Tiny, clattering steps followed after them. Angel. For some reason, the black rat had followed them all the way from the gang room. He looked so sickly and frail, Dazai had no idea how he kept up. But he did. Angel was a shadow trailing them across the school. Dazai tried to ignore him. That rat always had him feeling watched. Dazai didn't like it.

"A bathroom?" Draco's voice pitched with discomfort.

"A disgusting bathroom," Pansy told him. They watched as Draco's nose wrinkled. Pansy turned back to Dazai. "But the door to the Chamber is locked. I don't know how this idiot thinks he's getting us all in."

At the word—*Chamber*—Dazai did a hasty search around the hall. It was empty. Several floors away the Gryffindors should have been busy keeping attention away from this wing of the school. But Dazai still felt a trill of paranoia, regardless. It was too late to get caught now. "Pansy has so little faith in me," Dazai puffed.

"Of course I have no faith in you. You're *you."*

"I'm sure Dazai has it figured out," Blaise said. He held the bathroom door open, and they all pushed inside. Dazai grinned at his friend when he passed. "That confident smile, there's no way he doesn't have something up his sleeve."

Pansy shot them both a heavy glance as the bathroom filled in around them—just as slimy and disgusting as it had been last time. Dazai watched with some amusement as Draco flinched at the wet sound his shoe made on the tile. Blaise strolled in behind them, looking nonplussed. And Angel, who was tiny enough to drown in any of the puddles should they be so lucky, suddenly hooked his claws into Blaise's robes. He hoisted himself up one claw at a time. After several seconds, he perched on Blaise's right shoulder. Blaise didn't seem to have even noticed except for a surreptitious glance Angel's way.

"I don't see any—"

"Oh! You've come back, have you? Thought everyone forgot about me like always! *Boo-hoo!"*

Draco and Blaise both jumped, startled, when Moaning Myrtle floated out of her stall. Thick, wet tears were falling out of her eyes the size of silver dollars. But the tears vanished into nothing before they even hit the floor.

"I never forget a pretty face," Dazai said, charmingly, even though he'd barely even looked up upon Myrtle's entrance. He was already walking over to the sinks. Like last time, he lifted his coat so it wouldn't drag on the grimy floor.

"Ew," Pansy grimaced. She crossed her arms at Dazai, then at Myrtle. "Maybe people would visit you more if you didn't live in a disgusting bathroom stall."

"How am I meant to clean it? I'm incorporeal!"

Dazai tuned them out. He leaned into the sink with gloved hands, peering down into the drain of the broken one. There was nothing but shadow and grime in it.

Blaise came up on his side. "The entrance?" he asked, squinting down the drain.

Dazai nodded. "Password locked," he told Blaise—then Draco, when the boy appeared on his other side, "I'm going to pick it."

They both gave him a curious look. Pansy, stomping and splashing over from where Myrtle was levitating, let out a derisive snort. "How?"

"Magic," Dazai told them. "Obviously."

"Is that a good idea?" Draco asked. He eyed Dazai up-and-down, as though No Longer Human had left some physical mark on him. "I mean, won't you get sick?"

"This one is easy."

"Sick? I've never heard someone getting sick from magic before," Myrtle said. She floated down from the ceiling, hanging upside down with her mouth open to say more.

"Shh!" Draco and Pansy hushed her and the same time.

Myrtle whined tearily. "You're all a bunch of bullies!" Without warning, she dashed off to her stall again. Dazai heard her loudly crying behind it.

Blaise watched all of this, a frown furrowing his brow, but Dazai nudged him. Myrtle was unimportant. And touchy, at that. He was just opening his mouth to say something when—

Whiiizzz—pop!

They all jumped as a *whirring-pop!* sound suddenly echoed out through the bathroom. Through the entire school!

A second later, it happened again.

Whiiizzz-pop!

"What in Merlin's name—" Draco looked around frantically.

"What is that?!" Pansy squawked.

But while they were searching around desperately for the source of the *pop pop pop!* Dazai started to grin. Because he recognized that sound.

Whiiizzz-pop!

The fire-cracker sound of a glitter bomb exploding somewhere!

Blaise, naturally, looked to him first. Slowly but surely, the others followed Blaise's gaze. When Pansy's settled on Dazai's amused expression, she glowered.

At the asking look, Dazai cheerfully explained, "that's our distraction. We'd better get a move on."

Without further ado, Dazai closed his eyes to focus. To *feel.* He let his senses slip out. Center on the air around him and the latent magic buzzing there. It bristled against his skin like prickling mosquito bites. Dazai narrowed his senses even further. The magic, individual. A single sliver of air. *"Motus Subtilis,"* he cast. In reply to his call, the air began to vibrate. Ever-so-slightly. It turned into a low whistle. Dazai focused further. Just like he'd done the other night with Riddle, he concentrated Motus Subtilis, and the whistle pitch began to change. It got higher and higher. A dog whistle.

He heard a surprised inhale come from behind him. But Dazai's focus was too firmly on his spell to make out who it had been. He hoped, distantly, it had been Pansy. Shocked and amazed at what her least favorite person was capable of. Dazai shifted the spell. He moved it towards the broken sink, slipping the vibrating air down the drain.

He hit a wall. The whistling briefly stopped.

Dazai's brows furrowed and it picked back up again in earnest. *There,* he thought, *I've found the lock.*

Now, to pick it.

Dazai himself couldn't speak Parseltongue. But he could control the air so minutely—like a scalpel—that he could imitate it. Make the air speak it for him.

Dazai's expression twisted and pinched with concentration as he changed the vibrations one way and the next. Each time the pitch got closer to parseltongue, something minute would *click!* and the thing in the sink would shift. The whistle had changed, now. It was a whisper. Lisping and long. Snake-like.

"That's it!" Someone gasped. "That's the language I heard!"

Dazai coaxed the spell and the air where the lock was lacking, then—

Click!

It unlocked.

Dazai felt a brief moment of triumph, then—

Someone grabbed the back of Dazai's coat and lugged him back several steps. Dazai's eyes flew wide open to see Blaise pulling him away from the sinks just as they began to move.

The mirror folded out. The floor bent back like the brick wall in Diagon Alley. The sink started to descend into the floor. It fell, and fell, then vanished out of sight. An impressive wash of magic blew out from it. The sensation ruffled something in Dazai's stomach. Blaise had pulled him away just seconds before the floor opened up into a deep, black pit.

"Thanks," Dazai said, breathless.

"Anytime," Blaise hummed. He didn't let Dazai go until a few seconds later when the door to the Chamber of Secrets finally stopped moving.

There was a perfectly round, deep hole in the floor where the sinks used to be. It looked like a sewer pipe.

Then, *"woah,"* Draco and Pansy gaped.

Myrtle floated over to the entry first, hovering over the black pit with wide eyes. "A secret door! *Oh my..."*

"I've never seen that spell before," Draco said. "Motus... Sub... something."

"It isn't very useful," Dazai told him, peering into the deep pit below. It looked like quite the fall. "Snape taught it to me for practice."

"Oh. And it makes sounds?"

"Not usually." That had been Dazai's own little invention. Luckily, even though he'd changed the Motus Subtilis spell some, it was still a very undemanding spell. He was only feeling a little woozy for having maintained it for so long.

Draco and Blaise were now giving him slightly bewildered looks. But it was Pansy's expression that caught Dazai's eye the most. "You really did it," Pansy said, voice a whisper. She was staring at Dazai with surprise evident across her face. Her mouth hung ajar. "You opened the Chamber."

Dazai grinned at her. He was about to gloat—he wanted to gloat—when another resounding *whiiizzz-pop!* rang out.

Right. They were on a time limit.

Instead, he patted down his coat. He found the weight of his knife by his waist. And over his chest, the burden of Riddle's diary. Dazai nodded to himself. He had his things. He was ready to go. Looking to the others saw them doing the same—checking themselves for their wands. Or, in Blaise's case, his wand and his knife. "All set?" Dazai asked, even as he saw on their faces that they were.

"Yup," said Blaise.

"As I'll ever be," said Draco.

Dazai glanced to Pansy last. She didn't say anything, but nodded with a kind of grave seriousness. That was good enough for Dazai.

Without further ado, he stepped up to the hole.

It took several seconds for Dazai's eyes to adjust enough to the gloom to make out the metal rungs. And even then, he could only make out five of the rungs before they vanished into shadow. The metal was rusted in places. Mildewed in others. They looked ready to snap, and slippery enough to make climbing in any direction a one-way ticket to plummeting to one's death. Dazai briefly induldged the image of falling to his death, but thought if he broke his legs that might be a hassle.

"It looks..." Draco started.

"Dangerous," Blaise concluded. He was squinting down with a tilted head.

"Try not to break your neck on the way down?" Dazai said. At Pansy's glare, he sighed. "We'll take it slow. Worst case, you can Wingardium Leviosa yourself to keep from falling."

Pansy scoffed. "That's a high-level spell, if you want to cast it on yourself."

Dazai shrugged. "If you fall, it's just your own lack of talent then, I guess." He grinned at her when she sputtered. "Look at us! It's a regular Loyalty Club adventure!"

Blaise made a distinctly pleased sound that had Dazai feeling bubbly inside.

"For the last time," Draco said. Despite his folded arms, Dazai could hear a fond note in his words. And he could see the warm way Draco looked at each of them. "It's isn't a club, Dazai!"

Dazai beamed, then he bent down, planting his right foot on the first rung. It creaked under his weight. Dazai waited several seconds, just standing on it, to ensure it wasn't about to snap in two. Only once he was certain, did he slowly lower himself onto the second rung. He repeated this process again for the third, then fourth. "You're right," he said, descending into the darkness below, "it's more of a gang, now." By the tenth rung, Dazai was completely swallowed in shadow. Dazai kept his eye firmly focused on the next few rungs while he stepped down. Overhead, he heard the creak of someone else following after him. They were just as slow and steady as Dazai was.

A few seconds later, he heard Blaise's voice closer than before. He was above Dazai by five rungs. "How much further down, Dazai?"

Dazai stepped down another rung. It creaked painfully under him. He held his breath for several seconds before moving quickly to the next, less fragile rung. He couldn't make out his own hands in front of him. Couldn't make out the next rung. There was only pitch blackness.

"Uh," he said. His own voice echoed around him. "...how much do you think?"

"That's not an answer, idiot."

"Pansy is welcome to jump down and tell us herself."

"Hey!"

Blaise hummed from somewhere above him. "You two are getting along—"

Something *creaaaak*-ed overhead. Then,

Crack!

A second later, something heavy slammed into Dazai.

His feet slipped out from under him. He lost his grip on the rungs, and a moment later he was airborne. He was falling.

Stale air whipped past him. It felt like he was falling for several minutes, but in reality it was probably no more than a few short seconds.

Dazai slammed into the ground. Hard.

His legs twisted out from under him. Water splashed up where he landed on his back.

Dazai lay there, unmoving, to breath through the pain. His entire back felt like one big bruise and it felt like his legs were still vibrating from the impact.

Someone groaned above him.

No—*on* him.

Dazai blinked through the darkness—and his own swimming vision (he hadn't hit his head, had he?). Blaise was lying on top of him, groaning in pain. His cloak was blown out across them both like a blanket and, unfortunately, masking from view if Blaise had suffered any real injuries. He was heavy. A bony weight pressing into Dazai's stomach and lungs.

"Hey!" Draco called from somewhere overhead. It echoed, sounding a ways off. "What happened?"

"Did you fall?" Pansy called a second later. "Is Blaise okay?!"

Blaise grunted. He brought a hand to his back and grimaced. "I'm fine," he called back. He started to lift himself upright by planting a hand beneath himself and hoisting up. Except for the fact that Dazai was beneath him. Dazai squirmed uncomfortably as Blaise's weight shifted on top of him, pressing his bruised back further into the stone floor. Blaise blinked, confusion briefly flashing across his expression when he realized his hand had not found purchase on tile, but on the soft of Dazai's belly. *"Oh,"* he frowned, immediately pulling back. He slid off of Dazai, falling into a painful looking heap beside him instead. "Sorry. Are you okay?"

Dazai breathed in through his nose and out his mouth. "Just great," Dazai told him. He tried for a cheeky little smile. "Bruised, but great. Did you break anything?"

Blaise lifted himself into a sitting position, rolling each wrist and doing a few tentative stomps on to the floor that splashed in a pool of water. He made a face when he tried to extend his left elbow, but shook his head. "Just a little bruised. What about you, Dazai?"

Dazai did the same as Blaise—wrenching himself upright until he was sitting. But before he checked himself over for injuries, his eye wandered around the space they'd fallen into.

The first thing Dazai noticed was that it was dark. Dark—but not as dark as the climb down had been. There was a faint, blue-green glow to the entire corridor that Dazai could not find a source too. The room they'd fallen into was a long, narrow passage with brick walls and floors an inch deep with murky water. Something was *drip-drip-dripping* nearby. The brick was coated in moss and mildew. A few feet to Dazai's left, a metal rung was cracked in two. The whole thing was red with rust. Dazai glanced up. It must have been stressed under Dazai's weight, then broken when Blaise followed after. He could still hear the steady steps of Draco and Pansy coming down.

Angel was sitting beside the broken rung. He was staring straight at him.

Dazai shivered. "How come you crushed me and not Angel?" He asked, eyes narrowing at the rat.

"Dazai," Blaise chided. Then asked again, "Did anything break? I'm sorry I fell on you."

"Rather Blaise than Pansy," Dazai told him, honest. An offended noise echoed down from overhead, and Dazai snickered. When he stretched his arms out they ached, but didn't hurt so bad he couldn't use them. "Not broken," he told Blaise.

Movement caught his eye, and Dazai looked up to see Draco's shoes appear from the darkness above. He hopped off the final rung with a splash and began taking in his surroundings. His silvery hair looked blue in the low light. When Draco spotted Blaise and Dazai, still collapsed in a puddle, he hurried over to them. Pansy came down shortly after.

"You fell pretty far," Draco told them, holding a hand out for Blaise and hauled him to his feet with a grunt. "And you're covered in sewage."

"It's not sewage," Dazai hoped.

"Smelly cave water, then," Draco patted Blaise's shoulders, and a pluff of dust came off of him. It did nothing for the rest of his cloak, though, which was sodden through. Once he was satisfied, he held a hand for Dazai to take. But when Draco pulled up upright—

Dazai squeaked as a lance of pain shot up his ankle. He fell back to the ground.

"Dazai!"

Draco and Blaise sunk down to his level.

"Fine," Dazai told them, trying to stand again and failing. His ankle throbbed.

"Stop trying to move, idiot," Pansy said, coming up on his side. "Is it broken?" She didn't crouch down like the others had. But though her words were biting, there was a furrow to her brow that almost looked concerned. Probably a trick of the poor lighting, Dazai thought with a grimace.

"Not broken," Dazai said, rolling his ankle tentatively. It hurt. But, "I know what broken feels like. Think its a sprain."

No one looked reassured by that. Draco's expression wavered.

Blaise held up his hands. When Dazai stared at him, frowning, he started rolling up Dazai's pant leg. He sucked in a breath at what he saw. Dazai had to strain to see, but when he did, he understood Blaise's alert. His right ankle was swelled up at least twice its normal size, red and angry-looking. It throbbed in time with his pulse. Definitely sprained.

"Serves you right, for breaking my arm," Pansy said.

Dazai took a few moments to steady his breathing and slide his good leg underneath him. Then, he pushed himself to his feet. This time, he didn't fall back over. But he did have to close his eyes when his ankle painfully protested. It felt like someone had shoved a dozen needles into the joint, then given it a good shake.

"Don't get up!" Draco said, rising to his feet quickly. "Are you trying to make it worse?"

Blaise was at Dazai's side before he even opened his eyes. He'd loped an arm around Dazai's waist, supporting him in a sort of half-hug. Dazai stood stiffly against him. It took the weight off his sprained ankle just enough that he didn't think he would collapse again. "Lean on me," Blaise said, words warm against Dazai's ear.

"Already am," Dazai said. But he did as he was told, melting a little further into Blaise's body. The burning in his ankle slacked into the dull throbbing it had been doing while he sat. It was enough of a relief that Dazai breathed out a sigh.

"We should turn back."

Dazai blinked over at Draco with a frown. "What? Why? We're almost there." He looked around. The corridor stretched on for quite awhile. Dazai couldn't see where it went. "I mean. Probably."

"Because you're hurt!"

"I can't believe I'm saying this. Because Dazai is the worst, and this is sort of payback for breaking my arm," Pansy sniffed. "But we could try episkey."

Blaise shook his head. Dazai felt it ruffle his hair. "You must have realized that won't work by now, Pansy," Dazai said.

She grunted. "Well, what then?"

"He won't be able to climb back up," Blaise said, glancing back the way they came.

"I've managed with worse. Don't worry about that part."

Blaise's gaze narrowed on him, lips pressed thin with displeasure. "I'll worry all I like."

Dazai lifted a solitary brow, and Blaise made a small sound. So slight, Dazai only heard it because he was pressed up into Blaise's side. But it was there all the same—an exasperated huff.

"Fine. Just," with his free hand, Blaise reached up and tugged at his tie. It slipped loose from his neck, the green looking especially verdant in this light. Dazai watched all this with confusion. "At least wrap your ankle." He held the tie out for someone to take.

After several seconds, Draco took it. He stooped down to Dazai's leg, where his pants were still hiked up and revealing the swollen joint. Draco wrapped the tie around it twice, then pulled to keep it in place. "Sorry," Draco mumbled when Dazai winced.

"That's too sloppy," Pansy stated. Dazai half expected her to laugh at them—or to poke fun at Dazai's rapidly disheveling appearance. But she didn't. Instead, she squatted down beside Draco and took the tie in her own hands. She made quick work of retying it. When she was done, it almost looked like a proper bandage.

Mori would have done a better job. Still. Dazai gave his ankle a tentative roll, and pain shot up his leg.

"Don't move it," Pansy chided.

"Thank you Dr. Pansy," he teased, not at all sincere. She mimed throwing up at him.

He took a step forward, with Blaise's help, and soon enough they were back to their quest. Each step hurt, but Dazai hadn't been lying when he'd said he'd done more with worse. It was only enough of a hassle to slow him down. But every time he tried to pull of of Blaise and speed them up a little, Blaise would tug him back into his side, mumbling, "please behave yourself for me." Unfortunately, Blaise was just one of those people you can't really argue with. By the fifth-or-so reminder to behave, Dazai had grumpily stuck himself to Blaise like glue.

As they walked, the corridor spread out around them. The stone walls grew more damaged the deeper they went, and the floor bathed in a thicker layer of water. It was cold, down here. Certainly colder than the Slytherin dorms. Though maybe that was because Dazai was practically soaked through from his fall. Mori's poor coat—he'd put so much effort into keeping it clean, and now it was dripping with cave water. Dazai shivered, and Draco shot him a quicklook.

They must have been walking for at least ten minutes before the monotonous hall suddenly changed. Dazai noticed it first. He sped up, excitedly, at once.

Blaise pulled him steady. "Dazai—"

Dazai grunted. He had to stumble to keep from landing on his bad leg. "We're almost there," he said.

"How do you know?" Pansy asked.

He tilted his head towards the stone wall. Pansy looked at it, them back to him, scowling. "What? I don't see any—oh. Snakes."

At some point, the blank stone facade had been replaced with carefully engraved snakes. The drawings coiled around one another, looking like cracks in the stone. But looking closer, Dazai could see how precise they were. Dozens of carved-in snakes wriggling towards...

Dazai looked down the hall. The snakes were all pointed that way.

"What's that? It looks like there's a light down there," Draco said. He hurried further down the hall. The further they walked, the more stone snakes there were. "There's a door!" Draco's voice called from up ahead.

The faint, blue glow of the passageway was too dim to make him out, until they—painstakingly slow—caught up to Draco.

He was standing in front of a massive, solid stone door. There were two, massive snakes cut into the stone face, coiling around one another. It was at least four-times as tall as them. Pansy made a noise as she came up on Draco's side. "We're going in there?"

"Sure are," Dazai told her. Blaise deposited him by he door so he could examine it himself. Dazai couldn't sense any charms on the door, and when he lifted a gloved hand to it, nothing buzzed under his palm. The snakes carved into the wall were so many here, that he couldn't make out any one individually. They looked instead like one, writhing mass of scales and eyes. "Well, I am. You three are staying back here."

They all whirled on him.

"We're what?!"

"Hanging back," Dazai repeated slowly, like he was talking to children. "While I kill the basilisk."

"What he means is," Blaise said, leveling Dazai with one of his looks, "when exactly was this the plan? We're doing this together."

Dazai acknowledged that with a hum. "You guys are my backup. But I don't really need help with this part."

Saying this, he pulled one glove off with his teeth, then the other. He dropped them into Pansy's not-so-expectant hands when he was done. She promptly shoved them back into his chest. "I'm not holding your things, idiot."

"Pretty please with a cherry on top?" Dazai lilted. At Pansy's nonplussed expression, he snorted. "I let you come along even though I didn't want you to. At the very least, you can do

something useful."

"I tied your ankle up."

"Draco did it first. And it's Blaise's tie." Dazai flapped a hand around. The skin of his palm grew damp in the cave air almost immediately. "Pansy is kind of just here."

"You—! You're insufferable."

"Thanks." Dazai pushed his gloves back. Amusedly, Pansy actually held onto them, this time.

Blaise was watching him with a blank expression. "You're going to kill the basilisk like you did the troll last year."

Dazai nodded. "It'll work."

"I'm sure," Blaise said. Though he didn't sound skeptical of that, his voice did hold a level of trepidation to it. "But you'll be hurt."

Dazai shrugged. "And you'll pick me back up, when I'm finished." He splayed his fingers out. "Like I said—it's a regular Loyalty Club adventure."

Pansy actually snorted at that. Probably, she was remembering the few times last year the Club had been forced to drag Dazai to the infirmary after he hurt himself. Draco and Blaise, however, didn't look nearly as enthused.

"I don't like it," Blaise said.

"You don't have to. That's the plan."

"Wait. What if you get petrified?" Draco sweated. "If you meet the basilisk's eyes, then—"

"I don't think I *can* be petrified," Dazai said, because it was probably true. But if he could... maybe he'd get a nice nap out of the whole thing. Or maybe he'd never be un-petrified and he'd just die.

Dazai didn't say any of this aloud. Blaise's eyes were still on him, narrowed. Angel, who at some point had returned to Blaise's shoulder, watched him, too.

"That's too haphazard." Draco said. "Why did we just go along with you, again? This plan is awful."

Blaise sighed. "Because we always trust Dazai's plans."

"Well, there's your first mistake," Pansy grumbled.

"Look," Dazai said, "there's a fifty-percent chance the basilisk can't hurt me. But there's a one hundred percent chance it will hurt you. So," he grinned, "behave yourselves and stay put, yeah?"

Blaise frowned to hear his own words spat back at him. But all he said was, "Dazai, you can barely walk. What do you think you're going to do in there?"

"Hobble?" Dazai guessed. "I'll figure it out."

And he would. There were only two things he needed from the Chamber of Secrets, and he didn't need to stand upright for either of them.

1. Kill the basilisk

and

2. Get proof he'd killed the basilisk

Dazai felt for his knife again. It was still there. All set.

"Dazai... are you sure..?"

He braced his bare palms against the massive door. It was cold as ice. A shiver ran up his spine so cold it felt like he'd just been dunked in water. He kind of had.

"Always," he said. Then, Dazai pushed.

The massive door creaked on its hinges. Water surged around it. The stone doors parted weightlessly, despite their size, and a cool gust of moldy air blew at them. And the cold, blue light of the Chamber of Secrets bled out around them.

Dazai limped forward.

-

Whiiizzz—

George laughed, ushering everyone to follow him around the corner. He'd just ducked Hermione into safely when—

—POP!

The glitter bomb exploded.

George and Fred peeked back around the corner to see their triumph. And what a triumph it was! Lockhart's classroom was covered in shining, sparkling glitter from corner to corner. All the desks, the blackboard, the stack of signed books—everything was glitter. It would take days—weeks!—to clean it all up. George turned a brilliant grin onto Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, who'd been watching their antics a little skeptically since the first glitter bomb in Filch's office.

"Is this," Hermione strained, looking around nervously, "really a good idea?"

"Oh, come on, 'mione!"

"Yeah, Dazai loves the glitter bombs!"

"I mean, is this really going to distract the staff? Isn't it just making them angry?"

Just as she asked this, they heard the sound of footsteps clamoring against tile. A second later, *"Oh,* my classroom! My first editions, already signed, and... actually, the glitter isn't a bad look."

They heard Lockhart's feet crunching across the glittered floors and deeper into his office. Fred beamed. He whispered, aware Lockhart might overhear them now, "Not all of them are angry."

Hermione puffed out her cheeks.

"Not angry yet," Ginny said, "but he will be once he realizes why we're targeting him."

They all nodded. That much was certainly true.

"Gilderoy," Professor Vector's voice echoed a moment later. It was coming from Lockhart's classroom and marked by the sound of heels *click-click-clicking.* Ron wildly gestured for every one of them to shut up. "You too, *hm?"*

Vector's office had been one of their first hits, if only because it was very far away from where Dazai's Team One had been headed, and best case scenario the staff stayed on that side of the school all day. They'd doubled back for Lockhart's classroom pretty quickly after that, only stopping a few times along the way to glitter bomb a busy hallway, an empty classroom, and the door to the Ravenclaw dorms. It was an honest day's work. But they weren't done yet.

Ron, still gesturing for them all to *shut up, get moving, do something!* tugged on George's robes until he finally acquiesced. They scampered down the hall as quietly as they could manage. George saw Fred taking out the Marauder's Map while they ran.

Behind them, Lockhart's and Vector's conversation echoed before finally running out into a mumble,

"*Oh?* A serial glitter attack?"

Vector grunted. "Evidently. I'll pretend for a moment it bothers you to have the students so out of control."

"Of course it does! But, well, you have to admit the sparkle is really quite nice."

"No."

"Okay. Well. You're not getting a cameo in my book, then."

"Sparkle or not, it's concerning. I'm worried," Vector said, voice warbling out from the distance, but still distinctly stressed, "so much going on at once. And with the basilisk still on

the loose."

"...you think they're related? How interesting..."

Fred and George shared a look. That didn't sound good.

They finally came to a stop at the end of the hall, just around another bend. It was far enough from Vector and Lockhart that they could comfortably talk again. Moreover, it was far enough away that Vector wouldn't catch them by taking a couple measly steps to the left. When they stopped to catch their breaths, Fred was already folding up and putting away the map. He blinked at George—the simple look indicating something's up, but we're good for now, to his twin brother.

While the others continued to gather their wits, George and Fred took stock of their surroundings. They were pranksters by nature—as well as by skill. A little running for your life was well within the job description. George met Fred's eyes again. "Lockhart'll be a problem."

"When isn't he?" Fred said lightly. Then, more stoically, "Need something bigger than a glitter bomb, I think."

Hermione startled up at them. "Bigger?!"

"Don't think the glitter bomb really phased him at all," George hedged. "I was hoping it would still keep him busy, but..."

"Maybe two glitter bombs? No—three!"

"What that other professor said..." Ginny trailed nervously, "...do you think she knows what Dazai is doing right now?"

George severely doubted that. If only because he didn't think the staff actually knew where the Chamber was. And because Dazai didn't really do things by half-measures. No. When Dazai did things, he did things. And he'd make it everyone else's problem along the way. If Dazai said he was going to figure out the petrifications, you'd probably better start expecting the basilisk's head on a platter. Otherwise, you'd just feel silly. George and Fred had learned that the hard (read: fun) way last year, when Dazai decided he wanted to stick his nose in Squirrelly-Quirrelly's business, and walked away a few weeks later with the Philosopher's Stone in hand.

But George didn't think the Hogwarts staff had gotten the memo on that one yet. *More the fun for it,* he thought.

But Dazai's all-or-nothing attitude was as fun as it was frightening, sometimes.

Dazai. Who smiled whether he was in a good mood or bad. Smiled when he was under fire, or when he was pulling a prank, or when he was carefully avoiding conversation about that eye wound he'd come back to school with. (And don't think the twins had even begun to

forget about that! It was a little hard to ignore when Dazai got that faraway look on his face. A look George was now only seeing through one of Dazai's eyes.)

Anyway. Smiling.

As admirable as George thought it was, it made Dazai a little unpredictable, even to his closest friends. Everytime they thought they had Dazai's emotional playbook down, he would flip the script.

Are you smiling because everything is going to plan?

...or because everything's gone to shit, and you're about to go nuclear?

George and Fred were still trying to figure that one out. Blaise probably already knew. Blaise knew everything there was to know about Dazai. Or at least, that's how it had always seemed to George.

Fred nudged him, and George nodded. Right. Whatever Dazai was doing now, they'd figure it out. Unfortunately, the second Dazai, Draco, Blaise, and Pansy entered what was probably the Chamber of Secrets, they'd completely vanished off the Marauder's Map.

"Hey," Fred said. He was patting a coughing Ron on the back. "One thing at a time. We've got a prefect around the corner." So that's what he'd been looking at on the map.

George stood taller, looking around like he might see them any second now. A lie molded itself on his tongue automatically. *'Just talking a stroll with my kid siblings and their bookish friend,'* he imagined saying. And getting away with it, too. *'Nothing to see here!'*

"Percy?" Hermione asked a little hopefully.

"Nah. The Slytherin one."

"I think her name is Gemma."

Hermione perked up a little, but not in any way that George was expecting particularly positive news. *"Oh.* I met her on the train over break. Dazai knows her."

"*Good* knows," Ron asked, clearly skeptical, "or *bad* knows?"

She shrugged.

Ginny worried her bottom lip. "Probably bad. It's always bad with Dazai. Remember the Dueling Club?"

Hard to forget. Even though George nor Fred had been there, the stories spoke for themselves. And boy. Were there ever stories.

"Very true," George sniffed. Then, "let's give her something to focus on, shall we?"

"Rather than our favorite Snakey? It would be my pleasure!" Fred tittered.

George had already been reaching into his cloak for another glitter bomb—ever on the same page as his brother. He didn't light it just yet, though. "Let's get a little closer," he said. They all nodded, and as a group slunk around a corner that Fred indicated to with a two-fingered point. "I wanna see the look on her face when it blows!"

Fred matched his energy. "I wanna see her face covered in glitter!"

George laughed as loudly as he thought he could reasonably get away with—they were still on the run, after all! But it was fun. Pulling pranks with his family. Helping Dazai with his latest harebrained scheme. Hearing Lockhart muttering in the distance...

"I don't hear any screaming. Are you certain there's going to be a petrification, Septima?"

Actually, that one sounded kind of close. And coming closer.

"Let's hurry up," George and Fred said simultaneously. Fred took Ron's and Hermione's shoulders and hurried them along. George took Ginny's. They turned another corner just in time to hear Lockhart's and Vector's shoes clacking into the hall behind them.

"I can't believe I'm the one suggesting this," Hermione said, squirming a little in Fred's hold. He didn't let up, though, too intent on getting everyone moved to somewhere a little more secure. "But I think we should do the three glitter bombs, like you said." She was practically grinding her teeth when she said it.

As it happened, George super agreed. "Lockhart, Vector, and Gemma all in one big explosion?"

"Three brids, one very sparkly stone," Fred pipped.

"It's effective, is all... Let's all pretend I wasn't the one to say it."

"Who, Goody-Two-Shoes Hermione?" The twins chortled. "Why, no one would believe it if we drank down a veritaserum and swore on our lives first!"

She sighed, not looking very pleased even with their certainties. Probably, Hermione was nervous. They all were, at least a little. But she also sounded a tiny bit exasperated, which George received amusedly.

After a pause, Ginny asked, "Will it be loud?" She was preemptively raising her hands to her ears.

"Oh," they grinned, "super."

They finally came to a stop when Gemma's voice joined in the echo of Lockhart's. They were pretty close to the infirmary, now, which was unfortunate because—given the situation—it was maybe the the only spot in the whole school George didn't want to explode right now.

"...got in a fight," Gemma was saying. Her voice echoed and bounced off the walls. "I had to break it up myself, before he hurt any of the kids."

George frowned. Who was she talking about. And who was she talking to? He looked to Fred for answers, but his twin only shrugged.

"They were only trying to defend themselves, you know. That's why no one got in trouble for roughing him up a little."

A new voice answered. One George didn't know. "Gemma, my dear, this is exactly what I need for my article."

George didn't recognize who was speaking. It was an unfamiliar, masculine voice that crackled at the edges with age. Not any of the staff George knew, but definitely not a student, either. George frowned, and saw the others doing the same.

"But is it enough to get him expelled?" Gemma asked sharply.

Woah. Just what had they walking in on..?

The older voice hummed, clearly thinking on this. Then, "Well, that depends, doesn't it? Did the Demon hurt any of the students during this little scuffle?"

George's heart sunk in his chest and bottomed out uncomfortably in his stomach. They were talking about Dazai. About *expelling* Dazai. He met Fred's eye. Then he looked to the kids. They were all staring forward with wide, horrified eyes. Ron's mouth had dropped open into a gape.

"Well. No. It was only Dazai who got hurt, really." Gemma said.

"It's more convincing if we say he attacked them, instead."

There was a distinct pause before Gemma tightly said, "Then write it that way. People will believe it, even if there are no real witnesses... Right?"

Another pause.

George's hands were fisted at his sides and shaking. The glitter bombs strained in his tightening grip with a nearly audible squeak!

"They're..." Hermione had her hands over her mouth. Ginny was doing the same, aghast. "...going to write a fake article about Dazai to get him expelled?!"

Fred rolled back on his heels, something ugly furrowing his brows. George was sure he was making the same expression. Their big brother instincts flared.

Abruptly, Lockhart's voice came again, down the hall. Closer and closer all the time. Dang.

"I don't see any basilisk, Septima. Only glitter and empty halls. Though maybe..." He trailed off in a thoughtful way George didn't like.

Back by Gemma, he suddenly heard a door opening. Then, the man said, *"Ugh.* That sounded like Gilderoy... let's go in. We should continue this conversation somewhere a bit more

private. Never know who's going to steal my scoop."

Another second passed.

George, slowly just in case, leaned forward to peek around the corner. He looked out just in time to see the infirmary door clicking shut at Professor Spleen's back.

"New Guy and Gemma, huh?" Fred muttered, peering out with him. "Well."

"What are going to do?" Ginny asked.

Hermione folded her arms. "Light the bombs?"

George shook his head. Fred was doing the same.

"That's only a temporary distraction. And this," Fred gestured to the infirmary before turning back to face the others. "Needs more than temporary."

Ron was frowning. "We can't let Dazai get expelled..."

"But if we don't keep up the distractions, he'll get expelled anyway. For sneaking around the Chamber." Hermione glanced around cautiously. "I mean. Won't he?"

Ginny shook her head emphatically. "But he's going to save everyone! They can't expel him for that."

"I don't know," Fred said.

George finished for him, already thinking the same thing. "Dumbledore isn't here anymore. That's got everyone freaked."

"Maybe freaked enough to kick out the kid trying to save Hogwarts."

George certainly hoped not. But he also couldn't deny the truth—with Dumbledore gone, the rule book had changed. And there was no way of knowing what would be pushing too far, anymore. He fisted and unfisted his hands over the glitter bombs. His palms had grown sweaty, at some point, and there was a hitch in his breathing.

Dazai. Expelled.

Alone.

Their conversation during the tail end of Winter Break echoed now in George's head. This wasn't a prank anymore. Nor was this wasn't something that could be solved with a prank. But Dazai always managed to keep his head above water, even in situations like this. Admirable and scary all rolled into one. So George drew his shoulders up and decided, "I'm going to stop them."

They all blinked at him, looking caught off guard. Only Fred didn't startle. He only regarded George with an understanding stare.

"Gemma and Professor Spleen?" Ron asked. When George nodded—*obviously!*—he said, "What do you expect to do, mate? Blow glitter all over their article-to-be?"

"No. Well," George said. "I'll figure it out. Y'know. Like how Boss always does."

"Kid with a plan, that Dazai," Fred agreed.

George thought, for a moment, the others would shoot him down. Focus on the job at hand. Work the long term after. But a few seconds passed, and George saw the change. Ron squared his shoulders. Ginny puffed out her chest. Hermione nodded firmly. And Fred, of course, was always on the same page. No matter what. Even though Fred hadn't been there when Dazai and George had talking that night. But he knew. He always did. That's what Dazai called their twin telepathy, after all.

"Let's get in closer," Hermione suggested.

George peeked again around the corner, just to make sure those two hadn't come back out while they'd been discussing.

They hadn't. The coast was clear.

George made a sweeping gesture with one hand, and Team Two rolled out.

They came up on the closed infirmary door slowly, careful of getting noticed the process not only of planting glitter bombs, but also of eavesdropping on a clearly clandestine meeting. Team Two stopped just on the other side. They could just make out the muffle of conversation if they pressed their ears up to the door. If they all stood just right—George and Fred standing side by side, Ron and Ginny crouching at their feet, and Hermione sandwiched between them all—every one of them could hear Gemma, Spleen, and that other new healer discussing.

The door was cold against George's cheek. He winced a little, but didn't pull away. Spleen was talking. "...I can write that he hit them. But mastery of magic is a lot more eye-catching."

"I bet the Demon knows some the Unforgivable Curses," the other healer said. George couldn't remember her name.

"He's a little young for that," Spleen gruffed. "But you're right. People would read that article. And inside scoop..."

"Uh. Sorry to interrupt. But no one would believe Dazai was casting curses like that," Gemma said.

"He's too young. I know. But with an epithet like Demon Student—"

Gemma interrupted, "No, no. I mean because Dazai can't do magic."

A pause.

An extended pause.

"What in Merlin's name are you talking about?"

"This is Hogwarts. Of course he can do magic."

"Well. I mean he *can* do magic. Just not well," Gemma told them. "Trust me. No one in this school would buy it. Dazai is taking remedial magic lessons and everything."

Someone drew in a breath. "Explain."

"There's nothing to explain. He's awful with magic. Professor Snape had him pulled from most of his classes last year, because he kept getting sick trying to keep up with everyone else."

There was a shifting of fabric. Someone had stood up straighter, or walked across the room. George could only guess. But he did know that it had a pit of anxiety blooming in his gut.

"He gets sick?" the healer asked.

"He spends enough time in the infirmary," Gemma said. "...why? What does that mean to you? Wouldn't him being ill be a bad thing? Your readers might feel sympathy for him."

Spleen laughed. It was a rocking, ecstatic thing. George's heart leapt. He heard papers shifting through the door.

"*'Incredible magical sensitivity, resulting in a violent reaction to spell-casting,'*" the healer said. It sounded to George like she was reading something. Then, "The Demon is Pomfrey's Problem Child?!"

Spleen just kept laughing.

"What... what does that mean?" Gemma asked.

"It means—" the healer started.

Spleen cut her off, still chuckling through every breath. "It means, the Demon is hiding a secret. Magical Sensitivity like this—" the sound of paper again, "—barely qualifies him as a human."

Gemma sucked in a breath. So did George.

"What do you mean?"

"The Demon isn't just a rebellious little brat, he's walking around with more power than most wizards can even dream of." Spleen must have been beaming, but George only felt a shiver running up his spine. A dead chill. "You think the people are scared now, girl? Imagine how terrified they'll be to find out the Demon can understand magic at the same level as the Great Merlin!"

"Oh, Dazai..." Hermione said under her breath, *"...the Sensing Stone."*

"Is it enough to have him expelled?" Gemma asked.

"Dear girl, it's more than that," Spleen said. "Look around you. Dumbledore is gone, the ministry is growing, the Daily Prophet writing fake articles."

"So..?"

"Write a convincing enough article, and they might just have him thrown into Azkaban for this!"

George gasped. Beside him, Ron flinched away from the door, almost bumping into it if it weren't for Fred's catching him.

Azkaban. The wizarding prison. Inescapable and dangerous and cruel. Only the worst of the worst ended up there, spending the rest of their lives having the life drained from them by dementors. It was undisputed: *there was no fate worse than this.* And imagining Dazai there...

They hung there, silent, for a long moment. There was no responding clatter from the infirmary saying their reaction had been overheard.

Ginny drew out a shuddering breath. "Azkaban! Can they really..?"

"I don't know," Hermione breathed. "I don't... they're planning to release Dazai's medical records. That's illegal." She stood to her full height, stepping away from the door like the distance would erase Spleen's plan entirely. She shook herself. "I'm going to get Percy."

No one objected.

Hermione turned on her heels and ran.

George kind of wanted to do the same, but his feet felt rooted in place. And his mind, a mile-a-minute, was stuck trying to figure out how to stop the bomb that was Professor Spleen from blowing them all to the wind. All he could do was wait—the whole situation feeling far too serious for a prank.

Honestly, he just hoped Team One was having more luck than Team Two.

-

The Chamber of Secrets was a massive room, stone and brick near the floor that turned into something cave-like and craggy overhead. It must have at least three-times the size of the Hogwart's library. The cold-water floor sent a chill up Dazai's spine and a dull ache through his injured ankle. It splashed up with every limping step he took, wetting the bottoms of his coat, robe, and slacks more than they had been before. The walls of the Chamber were lined with massive, stone snake heads. Each one had its mouth hung open, and bored into each one's throat were tunnels and sewers like the one he'd just come out of. They vanished into shadow after a few feet. Dazai could only guess at where they all led. The entire room was lit up by a blue, crystalline glow.

And the Chamber of Secrets was empty.

There was no basilisk. At least, not that Dazai could see. He shot a wary glance to the snake heads. If the basilisk was hiding down one of those, it could strike out before he'd even had a chance to spot it.

Dazai came to a splashing stop in the very middle of the massive Chamber. The only sound around him was a persistent *tap-tap* of water dripping down from above. He reached a hand to his chest. *Would Riddle be able to tell him where the basilisk was hiding down here..?*

"Woah. This is huge."

Dazai whirled around, spraying water everywhere as he did.

Draco grimaced when it spit onto his cheek. He brushed it away with a sneer. "Don't splash me. We don't know if this water is clean or not. If I get sick—"

"Why did you follow me?" Dazai ignored him. "I told you all to stay put."

Blaise shrugged. He'd come up on Draco's side, and was now coming over to support Dazai's bad ankle again. Dazai started to lean into him, then pulled away with a frown when he noticed Angle on the other shoulder. "We're bad with instructions," he told Dazai.

"No, you're not," Dazai glowered. "You did just fine with our test key scheme."

Blaise shrugged. Beside Draco, Pansy was mouthing *test key scheme* with a look of dawning horror in her eyes that Dazai pretended not to have seen.

"What?" Draco puffed out his chest. "Did you really think we were going to let you run off and play hero all by yourself?"

"I did, yeah."

Pansy scoffed. "Idiot."

Dazai narrowed a look onto her, and Pansy grinned the way someone would when they knew more than you. He disliked it immediately.

"These two are your friends. And friends have each others backs," she said. "You're an idiot, if you haven't figured that out yet."

His heart skipped a beat. Like it had been stabbed by the assertion. Dazai's shoulders drew up, defensive to the blow. "I wouldn't call my subordinates' disobedience having my back." He leveled her with a look. "And that doesn't explain why Pansy is here."

"Pansy," she said, stressing the name with a raised brow, "is friends with Draco and Blaise. They wanted to follow you, so I followed them."

Blaise hefted Dazai further up his shoulder, and said, "Well. I'm just doing what I want."

"As always," Dazai grumbled into him. He shoved his mouth into Blaise's side to cover the way his voice warbled with a foreign kind of warmth. "This isn't very loyal of you, Loyalty Club."

Draco shrugged. "It's a different kind of loyalty."

"A selfish kind," Blaise said.

Dazai glanced at him, unblinking. Blaise merely stared back. "You..." Dazai cleared his throat. He pointedly ignored the way Draco's lips twitched upwards. "You're all awful subordinates. I'm demoting you all."

"Even me?" Blaise asked.

Dazai said nothing, and Blaise hummed contentedly. He didn't say, *'no. Not you, Blaise. I could never demote you,'* because that was too squishy and emotional—everyone knew Dazai didn't do emotions. But he thought the sentiment passed between them, anyway. Dazai didn't know what to make of that. He opened his mouth—to thank them for coming, or to order them off, he still wasn't sure. But before he got anymore than a cold breath out, he was suddenly staggering on his feet.

Blaise kept him from falling.

"Dazai?"

"Boss!"

A massive wave of magic rolled across the air and coursed through his body. No Longer Human bristled so violently, it made him suddenly dizzy.

"...fine," he assured them. But he kept his head hung low, staring down only at the smally churning waves lapping against his shoes. "Basilisk," he told them.

Blaise hugged Dazai closer. Pansy and Draco cursed.

"Where is it?" Pansy asked, turning all around while she searched. "I don't see—"

"Don't look for it!" Dazai shouted.

"Wha—"

He kicked her in the shin hard.

Pansy yelped. She collapsed to the ground with a splash, gripping her shin tightly. "What the hell was that for!?"

"The basilisk will petrify you if you meet its eyes," Dazai told her, catching her glare beneath a fringe of hair. "Looking around like that makes you the idiot here."

Pansy's face morphed through several different emotions. It started with burning anger, then paled and was distinctly horrified. Then, she was staring steadfastly at the ground, as well. "...idiot for not telling me," she grumbled, voice quivering.

Dazai rolled his eyes. He glanced over to Draco next—who had hastily covered his eyes with both arms sometime after Dazai had kicked Pansy. Blaise was looking down at the same spot of water Dazai was.

The slithering magic of the basilisk slipped behind them. Dazai jumped in place.

"Dazai," Blaise whispered to him. There was no reason to lower his voice, but Dazai found himself appreciating the hush regardless. "Plan?"

"The plan was you all aren't here," he said, because he could.

Another wave of magic. Closer, this time.

The sound of water shifting. A wave, rolling and crashing against one of the snake heads.

The basilisk was here.

"Keep your eyes closed," Dazai said. His watery reflection was warbled and difficult to make out. But it was a reflection all the same. He looked over at Blaise. They held a split-second of eye-contact before Blaise slipped his eyes shut. "And try not to get eaten."

"Eaten!" Draco and Pansy gasped.

"Well, it is a giant snake." Dazai let his own eye fall closed.

Cold magic immediately washed over him. In the dark, everything else focused. Magic was everywhere, here. In the walls and floors—the blue glow, Dazai thought. It was quiet except for their own heavy breathing and the sound of water.

And the basilisk.

Dazai knew its magical signature already. He'd felt it a few times before in passing. It was here again, now. Slithering, was how he'd always described it. Slithering and ancient. The magic was so powerful, this close, Dazai had to hold his breath for a moment to gather himself. In, and out.

In, and out.

In, and—

There!

The baslisk's magical signature solidified itself in Dazai's mind, and he pinned it in place with a triumphant grin. It was slithering behind Pansy and Draco about ten-feet off.

It moved. Water shifted around it—that, everyone could hear. But it was only Dazai who could feel the basilisk rising up, up, *up*—

About to strike!

"Move!" He yelled.

He didn't wait for them, just dove forward into his friends and shoved them all to the ground in one heap of robe and bone. Something splashed several feet to their left. Dazai didn't have the time to figure out what.

Not even a second later, the basilisk's teeth snapped down over the open air where they'd been standing a breath before. A massive wave of water cascaded out from the point of impact. It poured over Dazai and pushed him several feet.

Pansy screamed. She wriggled underneath Dazai, shouting, "Get off me!"

He jumped off of her, as Draco asked a shrill, "What was that?!"

"The basilisk lunging at—*shit, go that way!"*

"Which way!?"

Dazai reached blindly for Blaise's arm. He found robes instead, and yanked the boy behind him.

The basilisk missed them by an inch.

Dazai drew in a shuddering breath. Something pounded in his chest. *Fear? Excitement?*

He reached out for the basilisk, but it was already gone. Searching, he squeezed his shut eyes until he sensed the basilisk again. It was coiling in on itself. Preparing for another strike.

Dazai had half-a-second to tell Draco and Pansy, "Dodge left!"

There was a crash of water when they jumped.

Another, much larger crash when the basilisk slammed its full weight on them.

"Draco! Pansy!" Blaise yelled.

The basilisk slipped away again.

"F-fine!" Draco called back. His voice was shaking.

"How are we killing this damn thing!?" Pansy cursed.

Dazai ran a hand through his hair. It was wet, and sticking to his face.

"I need to touch it," he said, scrambling for footing on the slick floor. Pain shot through his ankle, but Blaise had him in an instant. "I just need to touch it."

"Well, touch the stupid thing already!"

"It's avoiding me," he turned to Blaise—eyes still closed, but looking. "Like with the pixies. You remember that."

Blaise drew in a breath. "They avoided you because they knew you could kill them."

Dazai nodded, even though no one could see it. "I'll have to trick the basilisk, or—"

"Or use one of us as bait," Blaise said. He didn't sound scared when he said it. Just matter-of-fact. Which is why Dazai already knew, well before he offered, that Blaise was going to suggest, "Use me."

Unbidden, an old conversation echoed in his mind. For just a second, Dazai was back in Mori's infirmary, fresh bandage on his leg and a fear in his gut that he might never see his friends again.

"They are my subordinates."

"Then you wouldn't be bothered if one of them died?"

"They're useful to me," he'd said. *"It wouldn't bother me."*

Back in the present, soaked head-to-toe in frigid waters, shivering and leaning against Blaise for support, Dazai selfishly thought, *you're not allowed to sacrifice yourself. If I have to stay alive, then you have to stay alive with me!*

"Don't leave my side," he told Blaise, stern.

Blaise made a small sound at his side. "Dazai, if I—"

"That's not the plan!" Dazai shouted.

Bad leg be damned, Dazai pulled Blaise to his side and leapt to Draco and Pansy. He accidentally stepped on someone's foot, but didn't apologize. Just stood over them. A shield.

The basilisk coiled up on itself and hissed.

It was a massive sound. Like steam exploding the kettle, or cicadas on the hottest summer night. Loud. Everywhere.

But it didn't strike.

They were too tightly pulled together—too protected by the aura of No Longer Human.

"Oh my stars, it's—"

"Just hissing," Dazai practically had to yell to hear himself. "Not attacking."

Someone breathed out on his neck.

"What now?" Draco asked. He was clutching Dazai's coat tightly. "We won't be attacked, but..."

"But we can never attack it, either," Pansy finished breathily. Dazai could feel her shaking grip on his elbow.

The hissing vibrated Dazai's bones.

"Boss," Blaise said in his ear.They were right on each other. Hand-in-hand. "What's the plan?"

The plan was I do this alone. The plan was live or die, I don't care. The plan was...

Dazai felt for the knife on his waist, but found nothing. It must have fallen out when he leapt earlier. "Damn."

"Dazai?" Pansy asked. She must have felt him moving around.

"I dropped my knife," he said.

"What do you need a—"

"I have mine," Blaise said.

Dazai's head whipped to him. "I need it."

There was a moment of stillness before Blaise started to shift beside him. Then, "here. I'm holding it out."

Dazai felt Blaise's hand bump into his ribs. He felt blindly for it, and eventually found the familiar weight of his old knife. He took it from Blaise's palm and flicked it with an audible click so the blade was pointed out. "For once," Dazai said, laughing a little manically, "Blaise doesn't scold me for using a knife."

"For once, you aren't planning to stab someone with it," Blaise said back.

"Well," Dazai held the knife out over his arm. And since no one was looking—not even himself—Dazai unravelled the bandages around his wrist. They fell into the water silently. The air was cold against his bare, beating pulse. "Blaise can't always be right."

He stabbed the knife into his wrist.

Blood welled up immediately.

Dazai could feel it spilling out over his arm, his hand, his nails, then dripping down in thick ropes. It splashed into the water.

Pansy flinched. "What is that!? My arm is getting wet!"

"It's part of the plan," he said. "Just don't move away from me and you'll be fine."

"Dazai," Blaise said, his voice grave. "What did you—"

The basilisk stopped hissing.

In its absence, the silence felt wrong. Hollow. Dazai's ears rang in the quiet.

Another wave washed up against their ankles.

The basilisk was moving again. Dazai heard it and sensed it's slow approach.

Closer, and closer, until—

He could feel hot breath against his face.

"Dazai..." someone said. Their voice was no more than a whisper. Shaking.

Blaise's fingers squeezed his.

Dazai lifted his bloodied hand.

A forked tongue flicked out to taste his blood. It was cold against his palm. Slimy.

No Longer Human activated with a jolt.

When the basilisk hissed again—a death cry—Dazai thrust his hand forward. His palm slammed into the basilisk's snout.

No Longer Human burst out from him, and bled into the basilisk's very being. It stilled mid-scream.

Pain bloomed behind Dazai's eyes like a poker burning in his brain. He cried out. His hands fell from the basilisk and Blaise both to clutch at his skull. Blood gushed out from his nose. White hot pain everywhere.

Dazai and the basilisk collapsed at the same time.

The resulting splash of water must have echoed out for miles.

Chapter End Notes

up next: the Chamber of Secrets (part 2)

Loyalty Club

Chapter Summary

Blaise Zabini, loyal second in command.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Dazai!"

Blaise's eyes were flying open and he was shooting across the distance before the basilisk was even fully collapsed. He saw, in dragging slow-motion, as Dazai's body went limp. The knife slipped from his fingers and fell by his feet. A second later, Dazai followed. Knees first, then the rest of him followed in limp collapse. Blaise was just a second too late to catch him, and Dazai dropped to the ground with a *splash!* His head bounced against the stone.

Blaise kneeled to roll Dazai over so his face wasn't in the water, and let out a relieved breath when his best friend coughed out blood and water. Still breathing. Still alive. It shouldn't have been a concern but it was, starkly beating against Blaise's rib cage. A pit of horror and worry made it hard for him to breath. But he needed to keep his own head above water, if he wanted to get a grip on the situation.

Just like last year, with the mountain troll and with incendio, blood was pouring sickly out of Dazai's nose. The water floor hadn't cleaned it away, just smeared it, and a second later more blood gushed out in its place. The entire bottom-half of Dazai's face was just *red, red, red.*

It was something out of a nightmare.

(Actually, Blaise was certain he'd had several nightmares like this. Walking in on Dazai to find him covered in his own blood. Dying.)

"Is the basilisk..?" Pansy asked somewhere behind him. Blaise didn't look up to find her.

"Dead," he said, eyes snapping up to the basilisk for only a split second. Then, he was back to watching Dazai. "You can open your eyes."

Dazai was limp when Blaise pulled him into his chest. His head lolled away, but Blaise moved him back so his face was pressed right against his *beat-beat-beating* heart. The closeness had Dazai's blood staining his robes a muddy red. Blaise didn't care. Like this, he could hear Dazai's breathing, and feel the pulse in his neck, and that was enough.

"That's what we were running from?!" Pansy shrilled. "It's huge!"

The basilisk's corpse was coiled around all of them, a massive wall of scales. It's head was at least ten-times the size of Egg's. Even dead, the way its mouth hung open—teeth primed to bite—was terrifying. The gaping maw was only a foot from where Blaise and Dazai now sat. Blaise could scarcely comprehend how they'd managed to run from it's strikes. They were going to have to scale its body if they wanted to escape the coil it had fallen around them in death.

"But he killed it," Draco breathed. "Dazai killed it. The petrifications are done."

"For good," Pansy said. Hesitantly, she put a hand on the basilisk's side. She winced back immediately. "It's cold."

Draco grunted. A second later, Blaise heard his splashing steps and then Draco was crouching down beside him, brows furrowed as he looked over Dazai's unconscious form. At the blood still spilling from his nose. "Is he okay?"

"You remember when he killed the mountain troll."

Draco nodded. If anyone had imprinted that day into their memories, it would be Draco. "He just needs to sleep it off," he agreed. "We all do. Then—*oh Merlin!"*

Draco dove forward, hands clamping over Dazai's arm—the one that had been hidden by Blaise's robes before.

Blaise startled.

Cold dread washed over him when he realized Draco's hands were quickly turning red with blood. It was welling up between the gaps in his fingers. He shifted to free Dazai's arm more, but couldn't inspect the wound himself. If he moved, Dazai would fall back into the water.

Draco's voice was fast and hard. "His arm is cut. When did he get hurt?!"

What? Blaise stared.

There was blood.

A lot of blood.

Almost like—

The realization was as horrifying as it was sobering. Blaise's eyes skipped to where his knife had fallen. There was blood on the blade. Around it—around Dazai—the water was turning red. It diffused out from where they sat until it hit the basilisk's corpse.

Dazai had cut himself.

"Blaise, he's—"

"Wrap it with your tie," Blaise told him, eyes falling to the pile of unraveled bandages by the knife. They were sodden through—unusable, now. Draco nodded. He'd gone a terrible shade

of white, clearly shell-shocked to some degree, but he undid his tie to staunch the bleeding regardless.

Pansy put a hand on Draco's shaking ones. "Let me do it," she said, softly. Blaise rarely heard her this gentle. It only made the situation feel more uncanny. Blurry in that strange way the world got when something so horrible happened you couldn't fully comprehend even your own fingers in front of you. Draco relented the tie easily, and Pansy turned it over with mostly-still hands. She dipped a hand in the water to wash off some of the blood, then lifted the tie to— "Holy crap," she gasped.

"What now?" Draco asked wearily.

"Dazai's got," she swallowed, "a ton of scars on his arms."

"Scars?" Draco asked. He had to drag his eyes back to Dazai's arm, where he'd looked away from with an ill expression on his face moments earlier. He frowned at what he saw. "Cuts. From... from what?"

But the way his voice shook—he had already realized.

Pansy shrugged. But her eyes, too, were narrowing the longer she looked. She was figuring it out. Dazai's secret—or one of them, at least. Blaise had never seen the self-inflicted wounds himself, but he'd always suspected. Always known, really. About Dazai's self-harming. It was one of the lines Dazai had drawn into the sand with blood and sharp smiles, and a line Blaise had always skirted fretfully. "Wrap the fresh one up," he told Pansy.

Her head whipped up to face him. "Blaise, Dazai has been cutting himself. You can't seriously want to just gloss over—"

"He wouldn't want us to look at them," Blaise said in a voice that left no room for question nor argument.

There was a fire behind Pansy's eyes, burning as intensely as the incendio she'd let loose during the Dueling Club disaster. But after a second, she merely nodded and began wrapping Dazai's arm with the green-and-black striped tie. It stained darker—bloody—almost instantly. But it was still better than leaving the gash exposed.

Blaise felt a stabbing pain in his own chest. That Dazai had chosen to hurt himself, without even a second's thought...

"Some of the cuts were serious," Pansy told him under her breath. Like Blaise hadn't already expected they would be. She gestured with one hand—a finger dragging down her wrist and terminating at her elbow. *Meant to kill,* her eyes said.

"I'm going to be sick," Draco said. And he sounded it.

"Do it before Dazai wakes up," Blaise told him. With the arm-wound bandaged, he drew Dazai more fully into his chest, cradled like something important to be protected.

"What now, then? Our master planner is..." Draco shot a nervous glance at Dazai's unconscious body.

Pansy gave Blaise a significant look before squaring her shoulders and standing. "The basilisk is dead," she said. She pointed an accusing finger at Dazai. "But this idiot has gone and passed out. He better not expect me to drag him all the way to the infirmary."

Draco frowned. Clearly, it was just now occurring to him that they would have to carry Dazai not only down the sewer, but back up the ladder as well. "If only we could use the levitation charm on him," he grumbled.

"That's what we get, for hanging out with the weird anti-magic kid," Pansy huffed. "Hard labor." She stared at Draco when he raised a brow at her. "I'm not carrying him."

"I will," Blaise said.

"Up the infinite, half-broken ladder?" Pansy rolled her eyes. "Good luck with that."

"Hm. Thanks."

Pansy groaned into her hands. "This is a cluster. This is such a cluster. I can't believe I wanted in on all your shenanigans."

"It's not usually this climactic," Blaise told her. He weighted Dazai's body in his arms—light. Too light. He hadn't been pestering Dazai enough about eating, lately. Blaise shifted until he had both feet primed underneath him, then groaningly got to his feet.

"Usually we just hang out in the office," Draco told her. He tried to smile, but when he looked again at Dazai, the expression fell into something closed-off instead. "It's not proper, pure-blood business but... but it isn't so bad."

Pansy looked around. At the defeated basilisk, at the blood-stained water, at the ruffled and sodden appearance of her friends. And at the unconscious and bleeding body of one Dazai Osamu. She sighed, long and loud, then mumbled, "yeah. Maybe."

Draco threw an arm out over the basilisk's body and hauled himself up it. It was taller than him, and Draco grunted when he finally hoisted himself up the hump. He looked around, taking stock of the scene. All the while, Blaise tried to figure out how exactly he was going to haul both himself and Dazai over the basilisk. Not to mention the, as Pansy had called it, infinite, half-broken ladder.

"Pansy," Draco called down, "hop up here. We can drag Dazai up together."

"Ugh," she groaned. But she did as Draco said without complaint. "Woah—"

"Watch your footing. It's slippery."

"I'm watching," Pansy grumbled. She spun around to face Blaise and Dazai. "Now pass up —"

"Well, well, well! Look what we have here!"

Blaise's heart froze. He couldn't see over the basilisk's corpse, but he knew that voice.

Lockhart.

That idiot Lockhart!

Draco and Pansy whirled around to face the entrance to the Chamber. Draco moved too fast and lost his footing, slipping off the edge of scale to land in a twist by Blaise's feet. Atop the basilisk, Pansy squared off to Lockhart alone.

Lockhart laughed loudly. It echoed out in the massive, empty chamber and sounded ghostly how it bounced off the far walls and snake heads. "The Demon, I expected. But he dragged you poor children down here with him, did he? Not to worry! I will save you!"

Pansy scoffed. "Save us? From what? The giant, dead snake we already killed?"

Reluctantly, Blaise lowered Dazai to the ground. He was careful to lean Dazai up against the basilisk's side so he wouldn't get anymore soaked than he already was. As it was, Dazai was shivering minutely from the cold. He helped Draco up with one hand, and swiped his forgotten knife from the floor with the other.

Lockhart didn't answer Pansy, only asked, "the Demon is here, isn't he?"

"What's it to you?" Pansy started to cross her arms, then paused. Blaise frowned to see she was reaching for her wand instead. Not a good sign. Draco and Blaise shared a significant look.

"I thought the others were going to keep an eye on Professor Lockhart," Draco half-whispered, half-hissed. He found his own wand in its holster.

Blaise shrugged. "Maybe something came up."

"What's more important than making sure we aren't caught in the Chamber!"

Blaise didn't know. He looked up the basilisk, where Pansy's fingers were twitching inches away from her wand. To Draco, he asked, "can you climb back up?"

Draco shot him a look. "I didn't get hurt, if that's what you're asking."

"Don't push yourself."

"I'm not," he said. And he sounded sure enough, that Blaise only nodded. Seeing this, Draco dragged himself back up the basilisk's spine. Blaise followed after, careful where he planted his shoes and knowing the snake's skin was slick from the water. Finally, he could see their opponent over the mound in dim light but grinning splendor. Lockhart was walking over to them from the entrance, a sure swagger to his splashing steps that Blaise distrusted. He had a wand in his hands—an ornate and dark-handled thing with a pale wood tip—and was twirling

it around like a parade baton. Blaise slipped the knife into his pocket and brandished his own wand at Lockhart.

Absurdly, Lockhart actually perked up upon seeing them. "Mr. Zabini and the Demon! Now that's a combo I'm sure of." He looked around excitedly. "Where is he? We have a grand finale to be getting on to!"

"How did you find us down here?" Blaise asked instead. For a moment, he considered that Lockhart was somehow in on the petrifications—that he'd already known where the Chamber was long before the Hounds had found it. But that couldn't be. Lucius was behind the petrifications, and Lucius hated Lockhart.

"All in a days work!" He sounded chipper.

"You just guessed, *huh?"* Pansy said. "Typical."

The change was instantaneous. Lockhart's eyes narrowed, his lips thinned, and an angry tremor squared his shoulders. "Tell me where the Demon is, and get over here."

Draco's fingers twitched over his wand. "Why? What do you want with Dazai now?"

"He's not in any condition to duel you," Pansy said.

Lockhart blinked. Then, he grinned. "All the better!" Blaise really didn't like the sound of that, but Lockhart was already beckoning hem to him, saying, "Come, come, children. We'll go with this: the Demon sent his basilisk to kill you all. After I defeated the basilisk, I was forced to take the Demon's life in order to keep him from hurting any of you further. Poor things."

Pansy, Blaise, and Draco all shared a look.

He was... *Lockhart was planning to kill Dazai?!*

"That's not what happened!" Draco said.

"Yeah," Pansy argued. "I hate to admit it, but Dazai did pretty much all the work on this one. Well, except for all that great first-aid I did," She gestured to the basilisk beneath them. "But you're just showing up to the after-party."

"He's a villain," Lockhart stressed. He was closer, now. Almost at their feet beneath the basilisk's corpse. "And I'm a hero. Do you really want to tell everyone you sided with the demon? *Oh,* you know what the Daily Prophet will say about you."

All the same things they say about Dazai, Blaise thought.

"Come with me. Tell everyone I saved you, and you'll be lauded as heroes, too."

Pansy scoffed. "We'll be lauded as victims."

Lockhart waved them off with his wand. The casual gesture had them all stiffening—expecting a spell to fly out suddenly. None did. "Same difference. Come along now."

Blaise's grip tightened on his wand. He saw Pansy and Draco doing the same. Behind them, Dazai's unconscious form continued to rest. Was he still bleeding? Was he still shaking from cold? Blaise didn't dare turn to check. There was a threat in front of him.

'...I was forced to take the Demon's life...' was what Lockhart had said.

Now, Lockhart merely lifted a brow at their defensive postures. He clicked his tongue. "No respect, the youth today." Without further warning, he lifted his wand and pointed it straight at Draco. "I'll bet Malfoy Senior isn't pleased with your little," he glanced to the snake—like he was seeing straight through it and to Dazai behind, *"rebellion."*

"Leave Draco alone!" Pansy barked.

"Put away your wands and play victim for me, and Lucius won't have to find out." He glanced to Pansy. "Neither will Miss Parkinson. Or," to Blaise, "the Zabini's."

Blaise rolled his shoulders. He didn't care. His parents wouldn't, either. But he knew the offer was significant to Pansy and Draco. Knew the choice weighed a ton.

'...I was forced to take the Demon's life...' Blaise had this nightmare before, too. But usually it was Quirrell playing the starring role. His palms sweat. His friends—

Draco aimed his wand at Lockhart.

"If my father finds out anything," Draco drew in a long breath. When he let out it, his expression was certain. "It's that I'll befriend whoever I want."

Lockhart's face went white; then red with anger.

Pansy raised her wand as well. *"The selfish youth of today,"* she mocked, eyes hard but lips curling upwards, "you know how it is."

Warmth bubbled up in Blaise's chest, and his wand joined Pansy's and Draco's in their offense. "Back off," he warned, voice and wand level. "We'll tell everyone the truth about Dazai saving the school. And that's that."

Lockhart cursed, "brats," under his breath.

Blaise's eyes narrowed.

Not a second later—

"Obliviate!"

Without warning, Lockhart threw his wand arm out in a wide gesture. A green light flashed out from the tip. Magic arced like lightning towards them.

Pansy dove for Draco. She knocked him down just in time for the spell to fly overhead. They slipped from the snake's back and crumpled behind it with Dazai.

"Oblivi—" Lockhart aimed for Blaise.

"Incendio!" Blaise spelled.

Flames licked up Lockhart's robes. He jumped, the spell slipping from his tongue. Lockhart threw his feet out. Water splashed up from the floor and snuffed out the flame, but Blaise had already leapt behind the basilisk once again. The snake was a protective barricade between them. The only thing giving them a moment to breath, ironically, the monster they'd just nearly been eaten by.

"Troublesome brats!" Lockhart shouted from the other side. "I'm doing everyone a favor, killing the boy!"

"You just want to write that damn book!" Draco swore back. His robes were wet and askew.

"Reputation is everything!" There was a sound like boots squeaking. Blaise tensed—Lockhart was scaling the basilisk! "You of all people should know that, Malfoy! If I save the world from the Demon, I'll be lauded for thousands of years! My name will be immortal!"

Blaise staggered back several feet when Lockhart's silhouette appeared on the basilisk's spine, a black shadow. *"Obliviate!"*

"Immobulus!" Blue light flew out from Pansy's wand and collided with Lockhart's green magic in the air between them. It crackled and stung the air.

A heart-beat.

The spells exploded violently against one another. A shatter of ice blasted out from the point of contact. It sprayed across the floor and slit tiny cuts in Blaise's cheeks.

Lockhart cried out. A line of red cut across the top of his nose. It bled down his face and chin. His expression morphed before their eyes. His grimace was a growl, his eyes piercing. The blood dripping down his face and the low light made him look like a beast.

"Obliviate!" he screamed again. This time, his voice rasped around the memory-erasing spell like it ground on glass the way up. Feral.

"Expelliarmus!" Draco's wand shot out a brilliant light.

A loud *pop!* shocked the air. Lockhart's wand flew out of his hand. It clatter to the ground beside Dazai's slumped body.

When Lockhart found his wand—found Dazai with it—his eyes blew wide with some desperate emotion. He leapt with a growl.

Blaise moved at the same time, jumping towards Dazai and the wand both.

Lockhart's boots slipped from the basilisk's wet scales. He tumbled to the ground in a heap. Blaise, still rushing forward, collided into Lockhart's falling body. The air knocked out of Blaise's lungs. He heard Lockhart groan painfully above him—beside him—below him. They were a tangle of body and hurt.

Lockhart's arms flew out. His fingers found the wand.

"Blaise!"

"Look out!"

Blaise scrambled.

Lockhart writhed.

Eye-to-eye with Blaise. He poked the wand directly between Blaise's brows.

"Oblivi—"

Blaise slotted his knife against Lockhart's throat.

Lockhart swallowed his breath. His Adam's apple bobbed against the knife's edge, and a thin rivulet of blood sluiced down from the point of contact.

Frantic, sloshing steps pounded toward them. Draco ripped the wand from Lockhart's grip and threw it several yards away, where it landed with a splash. Blaise didn't look away from Lockhart's terrified pupils to check.

"U-um. There may be a slight. Misunderstanding," Lockhart coughed. He winced when the knife didn't move, digging a little deeper with every word. "Let's put the knife down, now."

Pansy stomped forward, steps heavy enough to splash against Lockhart's cheek and run the blood there wet. "Misunderstanding?!" She shrilled.

"Yes! Yes! It—can you move that knife already? Where did you even get a muggle weapon in Hogwarts?!"

Blaise held the blade still. Lockhart's eyes widened a little. "It was a gift."

"A gift," Lockhart squeaked like the words were choking him. Perhaps they were. He was looking a little wildly between the three of them—Blaise, Draco, and Pansy. Finally, his gaze landed on Dazai. They were close. Probably close enough to touch. But with Blaise's knife sharp against his throat, Lockhart didn't so much as twitch. "Demons," he breathed, "you're *all* demons."

"Knock him out and let's get out of here," Pansy offered at Blaise's back.

"We can't just leave Professor Lockhart here," Draco countered immediately. "Knowing how inept he is, he'll get stuck down here and die."

"Oh no. How terrible."

"Pansy," Draco warned.

She huffed. "Yeah, fine. That's too awful, even for your stupid gang."

Lockhart's eyes widened.

"...gang?" he mouthed.

Blaise shifted the knife against him, stealing Lockhart's full attention once again. "We aren't leaving him here," he said, matter-of-fact. "That would draw too much attention on us. Dazai would take the fall for it."

Dazai was usually the one who made the plans.

Actually, scratch that—Dazai always did the plans. But Dazai was indisposed at the moment, and Blaise was his Second in Command. And it was no question that he spent the most time with Dazai in the whole gang. So. He just had to think like Dazai. That should be easy enough. Blaise's eyes narrowed while he thought. Lockhart shivered beneath the scrutiny. Dazai was a hard nut to crack—and a harder persona to try to copy. He was inscrutable at every angle.

But not to Blaise.

"Okay," he said. He pressed the knife in deeper. Blood *plipped!* into the water below. "Here's the plan, gang..."

-

The doors to the infirmary slammed open, startling Gemma several steps back from a furiously reading Spleen. Wiggins jumped at the sound so badly she dropped a potion onto the floor. It exploded in a shatter of glass and something that smoked purple.

"What in the devil are—" Spleen sputtered.

"Students!" Wiggins straightened.

"Percy!" Gemma gawped.

Percy, Fred, George, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione—they made quite an uncomfortable picture, fitting all six of them in the thin doorway—stood in one clump, staring into the room. Ginny and Ron looked the most out of place. Probably because their hair had turned a brilliant shade

of green and blue respectively. And Ginny's skin had been spotted over in massive, bright red polka-dots.

The stage was set.The twins sprung into action first—pranks and theatricality were their forte.

"Healers! *Oh,* we need your help!"

"Terribly soon! Right now, in fact."

Wiggins paled, taking several steps forward to inspect them. "What's happened?"

Ginny swallowed heavily around the last of her jelly-bean. Fred had shoved it in her hands right before they'd barged in, saying, *"it's our final batch from last Halloween!"*

"Turned the whole school different colors! It's not dangerous, but it'll give those healers something to look at while grab Dazai's papers."

"Just keep them occupied," Fred had said, *"long enough for us to sneak back and take what we need. Alright?"*

Ron had taken a chocolate, and Ginny two jelly beans. The first had dyed her hair a shade of green she actually quite liked. It was the polka-dots she was less than excited about. The red dot on the tip of her nose looked too much like a pimple for her liking. But Fred and George were right, the dots did make her look ill.

Wiggins fluttered over to her straight away. "Boils!" She shrilled. *"Oh,* dear. Okay. Sit down, please. Do not throw up."

"Um. Okay." Ginny squeaked. Hermione elbowed her very gently. Ginny swallowed. "Actually, I think—" she put an intentional warble into her voice, "I think I might. Throw up, that is."

Spleen's eyes widened, and he hastily turned to throw a stack of papers into the office. He locked it with deft hands before whirling back to face them. He walked to Ginny promptly and put a hand to her forehead.

Fred, George, and Percy clocked the quick movement with narrowed eyes.

"No fever," he commented.

"She," Percy sniffed, turning his back to the office door. "She had one earlier?"

"Oh, dear..."

Ginny sat down on the cot, eyes towards the office door. Wiggins and Spleen came around her, blocking the view of it. But so long as their backs were to the office...

Fred and George inched around the room, nearer to the door.

While Spleen and Wiggins looked Ginny up-and-down, Gemma narrowed a glare onto Percy. "You brought the whole family tree," she commented snidely.

Percy crossed his arms. "We were all together when Ginny's." He cleared his throat, clearly trying to recall the exact word Wiggins had used. *"Uh.* Her boils appeared."

Gemma frowned. "Was her hair always green? And his blue?"

Spleen looked up very suddenly from his inspection—a test that involved pointing his wand between Ginny's brows. She'd gone cross-eyed trying to see what he was doing. "Your hair changed color?" He asked, clinical.

Behind him, Fred quietly retrieved his wand. He held it up to the door lock and give it a tiny whirl.

"...no?" Ginny said. Then, getting more into character, she said a solemn, "No. My hair was ginger just this morning. And... and it was shorter, too!"

"That's not good," Wiggins worried. She fingered a lock of Ginny's hair, ogling the neon hue with bewilderment.

"I've never heard of an illness doing that." Spleen started to turn towards the others. Towards Fred and George. "And the other boy—"

Ron sprinted across the room and plopped down so quickly he nearly fell into Ginny's lap. She shoved him off with a grunt.

"Me too! My hair changed too!"

Quiet as a pair of mice, Fred and George unlocked the office door and slipped inside. They shut the door at their back just in time for Ron to shout a frantic, "it hurts, too! My hair!" that was loud enough to smother the sound of the door clicking closed.

"Your hair hurts?"

"That isn't a real thing," Spleen said skeptically.

"Actually," Hermione pipped in, "I read about hair pains in a magical medical journal last week. It's in the library. I could point you in the right direction, if you'd like. We could even go there! R-right now!"

Wiggins blinked several times. She looked utterly baffled at the situation they'd found themselves in. Percy wore a similar expression, actually.

But Ginny—Ginny *loved* it.

It was fun. Playing a character, hanging out with her family and friends, having brightly colored hair. Compared to how she'd spent the first half of the school year... Ginny felt like a whole new person. And she liked this new person!

She was so happy, she decided to start gagging, acting like she might throw up blood, or something. Ron watched her with wide, disbelieving eyes. Wiggins and Spleen fussed over her frantically. They held a bucket under her mouth and checked her pupils and felt her pulse. Ginny covered a laugh up as a dry-heave.

"Um. She's. She's very sick, as you can see," Hermione said, eyeing her dubiously.

Ron did a strained cough into his sleeve, presumably feeling inadequate with his own acting. Wiggins and Spleen fussed. Gemma and Percy bickered loudly overhead.

It was the perfect cover for a mid-day heist!

"What is this, an interrogation?" Percy was arguing.

Gemma scowled. *"Maybe it is! You always take Mr. Dazai's side, so you must know—"*

"I don't always take his side. I just—"

"It is too always!"

"It was once!"

"Twice!"

The office door creaked open. George's eye peeped out the crack. Checking the coast was clear.

"You're blowing things out of proportion, Gemma."

Everyone was too involved with their own nonsense to notice the twins.

"He's hurt students! My students."

"Not these ones. Quit blaming everything on Dazai."

"I'm not—!"

The door slipped open a little further. Fred slunk out, quietly shuffling a stack of papers under his robe.

"Have you spit up blood, by any chance?" Wiggins asked her patients severely.

"Eugh. No," Ron said, at the same time Ginny enthusiastically told them, "at least a cup-full!"

Spleen grabbed her jaw and pulled it open. She winced as he turned it every which way, squinting into her mouth.

And at the healers' backs, George locked the office shut and skipped out the front door, a large, cloth-covered box in his arms.

Ginny's brows furrowed—a box?—but Spleen misread the confusion as a sign she was about to vomit and hastily backpedaled from her. Wiggins promptly shoved the bucket back under her mouth. "Thank you," she said, primly taking the bucket. She set it in her lap and hugged it like a stuffed bear. The healers gave her odd looks.

Suddenly, the front door flew open.

Everyone jumped.

Professor Vector strode in. Her shoulders were back, and her spine straight, but there was a hesitance in the way she walked. Ginny blinked when she realized Vector's eyes were closed.

"Spleen," she called blindly.

Spleen stood from his crouch. He worried a glare onto Vector—looking decidedly annoyed. "What's with all these interruptions? Can't you all see I'm in the middle of something very important?"

Gemma shifted on her feet. Her eyes flicked to the wall for one guilty second.

Vector ground her teeth. "Get me a tincture," she said, ostensibly ignoring Spleen's less-than-pleasant greeting. "There's glitter in my eyes."

"Glitter?" Wiggins frowned. Ginny saw Fred try to smother a laugh.

Vector twitched. "Are there already patients here?" she asked. Her eyes were still closed, and one hand was rubbing at her face which—Ginny now realized—was spotted with tiny flecks of glitter like sparkling freckles.

"Ye—"

"Nope!" Fred suddenly called out. The papers he'd stolen were hidden under his robes, and he moved very stiffly to keep it from shuffling. "Look at that! I think everyone is already starting to feel better."

The plan worked perfectly! he seemed to be saying. *Now lets make our escape!*

"I—" Percy stop-started, blinking several times upon realizing George was no longer present. "I concur," he said a little stiffly. His gaze narrowed onto Fred accusingly. "We should get out of your hair."

Fred only grinned wider.

"What?" Wiggins startled. "She's covered in boils."

"Boils!" Vector stiffened. "That sounds serious."

"Actually," Ginny said. She pushed the bucket into Wiggins' arms. "I think I can feel them fading. Yeah."

"That's not..."

"Me too. My hair is..." Ron coughed. This time, it was awkward and not play-acting. "It doesn't hurt anymore?"

"That sounded like a question."

"It doesn't hurt at all! And maybe my hair was always blue. Who's to say."

Spleen's wide-eyed bewilderment was starting to look a little irritated—no, that was angry. "If you are sick, sit down. If you've only come to bother me—"

"What's the meaning of this, Percy?" Gemma snapped to him.

He lifted his hands—placating or innocent.

They all hurried out of the room one at a time, excuses and nonsense spilling from their lips. Ginny carefully edged around Vector. She sent out a silent apology for the glitter mishap. That had to hurt, even if it was a little funny. But Vector, eyes closed, didn't even seem to notice when they slipped past.

Wiggins, Spleen, and Gemma stared after them like a hurricane had just blown through the infirmary. Wide-eyed and looking utterly baffled in the aftermath of jellybean-induced mania. Clearly, in the short time they'd spent at Hogwarts, the healers had never heard tale of the Weasley twins. This level of chaos was actually rather tame for them.

"Disrespectful brats just come to waste my time..." Spleen grumbled.

"Yeah. Well." Vector sniffed. *"Welcome to Hogwarts."*

Percy shut the infirmary door behind them. They paused for a moment. Just breathing and settling their thoughts.

Then, Percy whirled on the twins. "You were too obvious. They're going to know it was us."

Fred pulled the papers from his robe and waved them around dismissively. "They were always going to know it was us. Subtlety isn't really our thing."

George, who was standing against the wall, popped off it with a bounce. That strange box was still in his hands. "Don't worry so much, Perc. What are the healers going to do? Complain that we stole the information they were about to distribute?"

"Illegally," Hermione reminded them. "It's illegal to distribute a patient's information like that. Doctor-patient confidentiality is pretty strict."

Percy's nose scrunched up.

"See?" Fred said, patting him on the back. "All good."

"That is not all good. That's..." the words fell off with a grumble. Percy rubbed at his eyes tiredly. Then, he turned a significant look onto George and the box. "What is that? I permitted taking the documents, not a free-for-all heist of the infirmary."

"Can we do the run-down later?" Ron asked. He was bouncing nervously on his feet, looking up and down the hall every few seconds like he thought someone might catch them post-heist. "Unless you want to stand around the scene of the crime all day?"

"It's not a crime," Percy said, sounding a bit like he was trying to convince himself of that.

"Percy's right," Hermione said. "But. So is Ron. Let's get out of here."

-

Dazai was in the kennel.

Everything was pitch black. Too dark to see the dogs, but he knew they were with him. He could feel their slobber wetting his fingers and face. He was wearing something heavy. A dress Mori picked out special for him. Maybe several dresses, kaleidoscoped into one another.

A dream.

He was dreaming of dogs.

The dogs were gasping around him—always gasping—because there were too many of them pressed together in tiny cages. When bodies pressed together, they sweat and stunk. The hot clamor of flesh and whining. But Dazai wasn't like that. He was cold. Cold to his bones. Shivering like one of those trembling, small dogs. The cages turned into golden frames. Painted dogs and snakes stared unblinking down at him. A deer. A wolf.

Dazai tore his gaze away. Looked to his hands instead. Red with guilt. Everything was red. His hands. The kaleidoscope dress. The paintings and the frames and the cages, too. It blended. Dazai felt dizzy. He was swaying roughly from side-to-side. Water lapped up his ankles.

"I'm going to drop him," a voice said.

Draco was behind one of the gilded frames, ineffectually trying to rub the red from his face.

"Make Lockhart carry him."

"I'm not letting him anywhere near Dazai. Here, let me hold him."

Pansy and Blaise were with the dogs. Gasping. Dazai craned his neck so he wouldn't have to look at his friends so unsightly. But the space around him only got redder. A red so vibrant it was like staring into an exploding sun. Or his own eyes, when they caught the light wrong.

"Hey, he's moving," Pansy said.

Dazai twisted to get away. Pansy's gaping maw, filled with a hundred rows of dog teeth were sweating drool down onto his face. He couldn't get away. Pinned.

She sniffed. "If he's awake, he can drag himself out of here. Dazai! Wake up, you idiot!"

"Pansy!"

"He's not sleeping, he passed out," Blaise chided. "He needs the rest."

"He can do that once we're out of the Chamber," she huffed.

Something poked Dazai's cheek.

"Wake up already. I want to leave."

"Now, it isn't too late to just leave him..." Lockhart offered tentatively.

Dazai's eye scrunched.

What was Lockhart doing...

...here?

Dazai blinked his eye open. It was like treading glass. His lid was heavy, and protested the slightest waking. The dim, blue glow of the Chamber was stabbingly bright. Dazai closed his eye again with a loud groan. He lifted a hand to blot the light. Immediately, pain, nausea, and exhaustion bled across his body. It permeated every part of him. Even breathing ached.

"Dazai!" Draco called. He was nearby—for just a second, Dazai heard a dog's barking instead. Sleep still tickled the corners of his mind. But when he pried his eyes open again, Draco looked like his usual self. If not a little worse-for-wear. His robes were tossed in every direction, and he was soaked head-to-toe. "You're okay!"

"O' c'rse," Dazai slurred. His tongue felt heavy, and tasted strongly of iron. He swallowed, grimacing as the taste curdled the back of his mouth. "Of course I am," he tried again.

Someone squeezed his shoulders. Dazai craned his neck back to see Blaise had dragged him upright and into his lap, at some point. "Hey."

Dazai took stock of his position sitting in Blaise's lap. Eventually, he replied, "hey."

The basilisk was a corpse around them, coiled in on itself and dead. Dazai allowed himself a sigh of relief at that. The agonizing weakness in his body right now was a sure-sign that No Longer Human had done something big, but it was a welcome reassurance to have the proof

right there. The basilisk was dead. He'd won. Pansy was leaning against it, arms folded into her chest. Sitting at her feet was Lockhart. Curiously, the professors arms were tied in front of him with a green ribbon.

Dazai's hands clumsily reached for his own neck ribbon, only to find it missing.

"Why does Lockhart have my ribbon?" he asked, voice a little gravelly.

"We needed to restrain him," Blaise said.

Dazai's brows furrowed. He tried to make sense of that, but there was a block in his head. A deep-set exhaustion that kept the pieces from coming together. *Lockhart... restrained...*

Pansy snorted. Dazai's eye sluggishly lifted to her. He had to squint to be sure she wasn't going to bear any fangs. "Because I'm not going to use my tie," she said, lifting a brow at his scrutiny. "Everyone else here might be willing to throw away their neckwear, but I'm not."

"Pansy's feelin' left out," Dazai teased. But the weakness in his voice had the playfulness instead sounding weary. His appearance must have been especially haggard, because even Pansy's expression sobered.

"Can you walk?" she asked suddenly. She pushed off the basilisk. "Or are you going to pass out again?"

Dazai's eye narrowed in concentration. "Why is Lockhart here?" he asked instead.

"He's crashing the party," Pansy told him, sounding terse. "Forget about him. Are you walking, or not?'

Dazai closed his eye, briefly feeling a wave of dizziness to wash through him. When he opened his eye again, they were all watching him concernedly. *"Walking...* I can walk."

Draco's brows furrowed. "You don't sound sure of that."

"I can walk," he tried again. It came out a little less wobbly this time.

Pansy nodded, looking not pleased but at least momentarily satisfied. "Then up and at 'em. This cave is starting to give me the creeps."

"I think that's the giant corpse," Draco said ruefully.

Giant corpse. Basilisk. Right.

Dazai's eye automatically found the basilisk's head—frozen open in a death cry. It was towering over them like it might eat them at any moment. But death held it still.

"Dazai," Blaise said. The words tickled Dazai's ears, but he didn't turn to look. Blaise's breath ruffled his hair. "Let's get out of here. Let me help you up," he said, and promptly did just that.

Immediately, Dazai's vision swam over black. It was a bit ragdolling, the way Blaise moved him. But Dazai found instantly that his legs—where they weren't aching—were utterly numb. He clumsily got to his feet, legs wobbly under him like a fawn's. Blaise caught him before his ankle could give out completely. "Alright?" Blaise asked.

Dazai nodded stiffly into Blaise's chest. Blaise's chest, which was wet and warm. He blinked and pulled back.

"It's your blood," Blaise told him. At Dazai's frown, he continued, "your nose is bleeding."

"Oh." That made sense. He brought a clumsy hand to his face to wipe at it. Then, he frowned deeply upon seeing, "Why is there a tie on my arm?"

Pansy made a noise. Dazai didn't have the energy to look over at her. He looked dumbly at his arm instead. "You stabbed yourself, remember?" She regarded him for a moment. "Do you have brain damage?"

Dazai groaned. "Sure feels like it." He wiped the blood from his face—as best he could with numb limbs and no mirror, that was—and dirtied the green tie red. When he looked up again, his vision was no steadier. But his mind was coming back in tiny pieces. One thing at a time. He glanced to Lockhart.

Blaise's grip held him. "Don't worry about it. I've got a plan for Lockhart."

Lockhart shivered. He looked like he was about to be sick. He also looked pretty beat-up. There was blood on his face and neck. It was a good look for him.

"What, Blaise is making plans now?"

"You're exhausted," Blaise said. "Let me take it from here. You deserve rest, Boss."

Dazai sniffed. He wanted to argue. He did. But he also wanted to take a nap so long and thorough he might not wake again at all. He merely nodded into Blaise's chest. Never mind that the blood smeared over his cheek and forehead. "Lucky I've got a good Second," he mumbled. Blaise's hum rumbled warmly.

"Great. We're getting out of here, then?" Pansy asked. She grabbed Lockhart by the arm and hauled him to his feet. Lockhart squeaked. Dazai would have laughed if he wasn't on the verge of passing out again.

Draco pulled himself up the basilisk's spine and stood on top of it. He held an hand out. Very carefully, Blaise moved Dazai to Draco. Blaise handed him off, and together they pulled him up the basilisk's body. Then—

"Wait," Dazai jerked back suddenly.

He nearly fell out of Draco's arms, but Draco scrambled to hold his coat at the last second. "Dazai! Don't do that!"

A hand pressed against his back—Pansy's—and pushed him safely up the basilisk's back. No longer in danger of falling unless he suddenly lost consciousness again. Which was feeling pretty likely, actually.

Dazai swallowed around something hard, dry, and tasting of blood. "The basilisk," he gurgled. "The—where's my knife?"

"Oh, like hell we're giving you a knife after all that," Pansy gaped.

"We're done, Dazai," Draco said. He readjusted his hold on Dazai so he was no longer only gripping Mori's coat but Dazai's waist instead. It felt a little more stable, but the stabbing pain in Dazai's ankle made everything feel pretty unsteady, regardless. "Right? I mean. The basilisk is dead."

"Proof," Dazai said. "I need proof."

Blaise, who had disappeared from Dazai's vision several seconds ago, suddenly returned with two knives in hand. One, his joining gift from the year prior. And the second, the knife Dazai had dropped during the fight. "What do you mean, *proof?"*

His fingers cradled the knife. "That the basilisk is dead. Who would believe me?" People were welcome to fear how incredibly powerful he was, to kill a basilisk. But he couldn't risk the alternative—that all his karma finally caught up and expelled him.

"...no one," Draco said. He drew in a breath. "Dazai is right. If he comes around saying that he killed the basilisk—"

"Demons don't tell the truth, blah blah blah," Pansy blew a raspberry. "Lockhart can vouch for us," she nudged Lockhart, and he flinched.

"No one would believe Lockhart killed the basilisk, either. He couldn't even kill *us."*

Lockhart jerked. "Hey!"

Dazai stared at all of them. He felt like he'd missed a lot. He blew out a wavering breath and pointed his knife with a shaking hand. "The proof is easy," he said, drawing the gang's attention back to him.

"What?"

"How?"

The knife caught blue light. "Just. I need to borrow a steady hand. Which one of you wants to do some stabbing?"

Between Dazai's exhaustion, his bad ankle, and Pansy's constant grumbling *("I have to climb this death trap and maintain Wingardium Leviosa! Of course I'm going slow!")* it must have taken them at least fourty minutes just to leave the Chamber. But finally, the girls' bathroom filled in around them. Dazai had immediately collapsed onto the floor of it, limbs sprawling out in every direction. For once, the grimy, wet floor hadn't bothered him in the slightest. In fact, the cold actually felt a little nice against his swollen limbs and pounding head.

Pansy had plopped down next time him. A loud *thump!* sounded a second after when she dropped her spell. The proof Dazai had needed them to collect, which she had strenuously levitated all the way back, collided with a sink.

Unfortunately, their break was short-lived. Blaise was hauling Dazai back to his feet just as he was starting to drift off to sleep.

"Not yet, Dazai," he said, supporting almost all of Dazai's weight by this point. He slipped Dazai's ribbon in the pocket of Mori's coat without a word. Dazai didn't turn to see what they were doing with Lockhart, now. Blaise said he'd had it covered. Dazai trusted him. "You can rest soon. I promise."

"Blaise is too mean," Dazai grumbled back. "Just leave me here to die."

He heard Pansy and Draco exchange words behind them. A moment later, Draco cast the levitation spell. The spellwork writhed against Dazai's skin and he winced.

"Sorry," Draco said.

Dazai grumbled something unintelligible back.

They only had to walk (stumble) for another five minutes before they found Snape, McGonagall, Spleen, and Vector standing around a massive explosion of glitter. The entire hall from floor to ceiling was coated in sparkling, shimmering mess. It was impressive work. And would have been a lot more amusing if Dazai could see straight enough to tell the difference between glitter and his brain short-circuiting behind his eyes. Either way, the hall was going to be covered in sparkles for at least another month.

Draco let out a snort. The staff all turned at the noise. Their eyes widened.

Snape halted half-way through an irritated-looking gesture and just stared at them. His eyes settled widely on Dazai's own. Then—

Dazai had barely even blinked, and Snape had already crossed the distance between them. His hands fell on Dazai's shoulders first. Then he lifted Dazai's chin with two fingers. His eyes narrowed at the blood still falling from Dazai's nose, and the way Dazai's eye kept falling off of his before snapping back up and refocusing. Dazai let himself be pulled around

by his teacher. He only grimaced once when Snape grabbed his head to feel for bumps, and the jostling sent a pain behind Dazai's eyes so stabbing he briefly saw stars.

"What happened?" Snape asked severely. He'd grabbed Dazai's arm and was holding the bandaged wound there with an expression like it had hurt him just as badly.

The other staff followed behind with haste in their steps. Each fell into place just behind Snape.

"Gilderoy?" McGonagall asked skeptically. Her eyes flicked to the red cut across his nose, then flashed to Dazai's own more serious injuries. A minute change overcame her posture. Defensive.

Blaise answered them. "Professor Lockhart was helping us."

The feeling of Blaise's voice rumbling against him was more startling to Dazai than the words themselves. He blinked back to focus and drew away slightly from Snape's inspection. But Snape's frown only deepened. He held Dazai's head still with a hand on his cheek, then pinched Dazai's nostril's closed to shutter the thick bleeding. Dazai gasped out through his mouth.

"Oww," he gargled around blood. Snape said nothing.

"Helping how?" Vector asked thinly.

Blaise stood a little straighter. Dazai felt the change more than saw it, and tried to do the same himself. But all he succeeded in doing was squirming a little in place. It was clear that Blaise was gathering up everyone's attention for the big reveal—and it was working, too, if the anticipatory silence was anything to go by.

But Snape's gaze never strayed from Dazai. Dazai stared back into his professor's eyes, frowning tiredly at the strange, raw expression he saw their.

"I killed the—" Lockahrt started.

"We killed the basilisk," Blaise declared.

Silence.

Utter, echoing silence.

Snape's hands froze on Dazai's skin.

"You what?"

"Killed the basilisk," Blaise said again.

Everyone—excepting Snape—was staring at him. Dazai was suddenly grateful Blaise had offered to take point of everything from here on out. Though he couldn't help but feel it was a little bit his job to make the big announcements like this...

Dazai felt Blaise gesture for Draco. A second later, an audible gasp rang through the hall.

Floating a foot above the ground, the basilisk's decapitated head levitated out from behind Draco's back.

"Oh my stars!" Vector shrilled.

Spleen stumbled backwards several feet, tripping and landing on his backside with a shout.

Dazai understood why perfectly; the basilisk's head was monstrous—grotesque. Draco and Pansy had alternated hacking through scale and bone with his knife to decapitate it. They'd been jagged, bloody cuts. Violent things. The basilisk's skin was flayed and trailing on the floor behind it when they finally detached the skull. Only then did they realize it was too large to fit up the exit. Lockhart had thrown up when Draco had been forced to break the basilisk's jaw off.

The head fell at McGonagall's feet loudly. Blood splattered out from it, turning the entire bottom half of her robes a muddy red. It blotted out the glitter crudely.

"Wh-what is... this?"

"Your..." Dazai swallowed, forcing some energy into his voice where there was none. "Your basilisk. Thought you might want some proof."

Blaise and Snape both tightened their holds on him. Dazai's mouth snapped shut.

Everyone was staring at him. At the baslisk's decapitated skull. At all of them—bloody and soaked to the bone.

"You—that's impossible," Vector gaped. "No mere students could kill the basilisk!"

Lockhart puffed out his chest. "I-I helped, you know!"

Blaise nodded, even though Dazai certainly didn't remember that having happened. But he was feeling foggy—more and more by the second—*so perhaps...*

"Dazai and Professor Lockhart worked together to save Hogwarts," he told them. "The only villain here is the basilisk."

"Was the basilisk," Pansy said, stepping up on Blaise's side.

Oh, Dazai thought. *They're trying to clear my name?* The realization felt distant and fuzzy. Dazai rubbed at his face. His hands were a red blur, lacking any distinction. *Don't do that, he wanted to tell them,* but his mouth was busy breathing and his head feeling stuffed with cotton. *I'm the villain. I know I am.*

Lockhart coughed like someone had shoved him. Perhaps they had. "Y-yes. And I suppose, given both our roles in the defeat of the basilisk... the Demon could also be called a... a Champion of the People. I suppose. Don't... don't quote me on that, any one of you!"

Champion of the people, Dazai Osamu.

Dazai thought he should be feeling triumph, right now. But all he really felt was hurt. Exhaustion. Nausea. The aching stress of No Longer Human roiled together in Dazai's gut. He slumped under all of it.

"...We can drill them about specifics later," Snape sounded further away, but Dazai could still feel him and didn't think he really was. Just. A little floaty. "We have injured students that need looking after."

"But the basilisk—!"

"Is dead," Draco said. "We're not."

"Not yet," Dazai slurred. Maybe soon, though. With any luck.

Snape breathed out a small curse.

Next thing Dazai knew, he was being pulled from Blaise's side. Dazai made a hurt sound. He didn't want to leave Blaise. But then, someone was shushing him.

Snape lifted him into his arms. His arms folded underneath Dazai's knees and back, holding him into his chest. Dazai melted into it. He felt the steady *beat-beat-beat* of Snape's heart against his cheek. It was warm. The pain in his ankle, the sickness in his gut, the pounding of his skull—it didn't go away. But it suddenly felt a lot less awful. He sighed into Snape's chest, too tired to fuss much more than a whining, "not doing much for the *Dad Snape* allegations."

Snape grunted. Dazai felt it even as he let his eye slip shut.

"Sir," someone said.

Dazai breathed in. Snape smelled of instant coffee and lemon flowers.

"I'll expect a full explanation," Snape said. "After the infirmary."

Excitedly, Spleen began, "I will take a look at the boy straight away!"

Dazai jerked in Snape's arms. He couldn't! They would discover No Longer Human, and—!

"I will take care of Mr. Dazai. You and your assistant will check the others," Snape growled. No room for question.

Oh. Good. Dazai felt himself relax almost instantly. Blaise would take care of the talking, and Snape would take care of him.

I'm...

Dazai was too tired to argue his own mind, so the thought slipped by unencumbered.

I'm safe.

And safe meant he could finally let go.

And sleep.

That night, Dazai dreamt of honey.

Chapter End Notes

next up: Dazai wakes up.

End of the Line

Chapter Summary

No more loose ends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dazai's dream was sweet, and soft, and long. It was rare that he got so much uninterrupted sleep, except for when he was on the verge of insomnia-induced death or was deeply sedated in Mori's office. Both of which happened at a frequency more common than Dazai suspected the rest of the population experienced. But still not frequent enough for Dazai ever to really feel well-rested.

Understandably, Dazai woke up on edge. He had one ear listening out for Mori, the other for Father. Half-consciousness couldn't steal his paranoia. And even though his he ached all the way down to his fingertips, he reached out for a knife. A snake about to strike.

Soft light tickled his eyelid.

Oh, Dazai remembered sluggishly. *I'm at Hogwarts.*

He pried open his eye, crusty with a long sleep, and blinked blearily up at the infirmary ceiling. Warm, soft, and linen. Nothing at all like Mori's cement-slab office. It must have still been the small hours of the morning, Dazai thought, because the only light filtering through the infirmary came thinly through a window. An overhead torch was lit, but only dimly. Dazai didn't think he'd ever seen a dim flame before, but magic was strange enough that he didn't bother to question it. The warm atmosphere nearly lulled Dazai back to sleep, but now that he was awake, he couldn't shake the nagging feeling that he needed to be up. Doing something.

Feeling groggy, Dazai started to push himself upright. This was an instant mistake.

Aching, burning pain shot through his entire body, ringing out as a stabbing agony in his head. No Longer Human—when was the last time he overtaxed No Longer Human this badly? Dazai foggily remembered killing the mountain troll—killing Quirrell—and couldn't decide one way or another which time was the worst. They all sucked. Everything sucked. He let out a pitiful groan and slumped back into the bed.

"Don't push yourself, brat."

Dazai jerked upright immediately.

"Lay back down," Snape said, brows furrowed somewhere between annoyance and concern, and pressed a hand to Dazai's chest. He pushed lightly until Dazai's head landed back on the pillow.

Dazai tried not to make his sigh of relief too obvious. "What are—" he cleared his throat, "—what are you doing here?"

What am I doing here? he almost asked. Because if Dazai was being entirely honest, he did not remember going to the infirmary. He didn't remember much of anything after the basilisk, actually. When he really scratched his brain over it—which he didn't want to do, because his head hurt like hell—he only drew up blurry images of the Loyalty Club, Lockhart, and a few other staff Dazai was currently blanking on. But he was hardly going to admit to any of that.

Snape settled a heavy, scrutinizing gaze onto him. The hand still on Dazai's chest moved to his wrist and pressed into the pulse-point there for several moments. Dazai forced himself calm—willed his rabbit heartbeat to slow a little. Snape said nothing, only moved his inspection up Dazai's arm. His hand grazed over a fresh bandage there. Dazai stilled at once, but Snape only seemed to be doing a once-over. He didn't linger more than a second. Shortly, he had moved up to Dazai's forehead.

"I don't have a fever," Dazai told him, swallowing around his tongue.

"No," Snape said after a pause. He dropped his hand back to his lap. Dazai blinked when he saw that Snape's robes were wrinkled. More than that, his sleeves were dirtied with blood and —if Dazai wasn't mistaken—glitter. "Not anymore. How do you—"

"Are you wearing yesterday's clothes, sir?"

Snape's mouth snapped shut.

"You look rumpled," Dazai told him.

Snape's frown pinched at the edges. Concerned. "You have been asleep for two days, Mr. Dazai."

Dazai's mind racketed with that. *I've been asleep for two days.* Then, *I've been asleep for two days, in a school full of people who want to uncover my secrets.* "You," Dazai started, voice going a little reedy without his consent. "You've been wearing that for two whole days?"

"Priorities, Problem Child," Snape said. But he didn't sound mad. Just exhausted. And even though Dazai had apparently been knocked out for the last forty-eight hours, he felt that in his bones. "How are you feeling?"

"Like death," he grumbled. Snape eyes went wide and Dazai quickly amended. "Not actually. I wish." He shook his head, and that hurt a lot, so he resolved to never move ever again. "Two days, really?"

"Yes," Snape said. He was still regarding Dazai with a very serious, assessing gaze. Dazai merely stared back, meeting Snape's eye with an unwavering kind of exhaustion. Eventually,

he sighed. "You should know better than to use so much magic. Mr. Zabini filled me in on how you all killed the baslisk," he said. Dazai waited patiently for the explanation, eager to know himself just what variation of the truth Blaise had told everyone. "Your magic has improved, but not so much that you can use it freely," he said, lips tight.

"All those spells I used to kill the basilisk," Dazai guessed. When Snape's expression tightened—worried, not suspicious—Dazai said more confidently, "I guess was a bad idea. My bad."

It shouldn't have come as a surprise—it didn't—that Blaise had not told the staff about No Longer Human. But it was certainly a weight off Dazai's back to have at least one blank from that day filled in. No Longer Human was still a secret, and Snape was sitting at his bedside. It didn't seem like he was in trouble. But people changed their minds at the drop of a hat. Father always had.

Dazai watched Snape, who breathed out, sliding back into his chair. It creaked, and so did his knees. "It would be a relief to many people if you learned to take better care of yourself, brat."

Dazai drew on a smile. "Even Snape? What a doting father."

Snape twitched. For a second, Dazai thought he was going to flick him between the eyes, but all he did was readjust the blankets around Dazai's shoulders. "...Yes. This is certainly a new low-point for me."

"Aw, I think it's cute." He didn't, but that was besides the point.

(But he was also hurt and exhausted, and the blanket did feel soft against his chin. So.)

"That doesn't leave this room," Snape said, looking suddenly self-conscious.

"Cross my heart, hope to die a quick and painless death!" Dazai grinned, then grimaced when a bolt of pain shot behind his eyes.

Snape waited for Dazai to recover before giving him the run-down. "Professor Spleen looked at your ankle. He said it was only sprained, then I promptly shoved him off to look at your friends. Unfortunately, I can't use a healing spell for it. You'll have to stay off your feet for another few days."

At the foot of the bed, Dazai's leg was propped up on a stack of green and white pillows. He was barefoot, except for the wrapping of medical tape around the joint. It looked to Dazai as if someone had tried to splint it. But instead of using any of the normal supplies Mori might have used, there was a kind of woody-vine wrapped around the tape and part-way up his leg. He blinked at it, stupefied. A tiny, green leave waved up from just beside his big toe. Dazai gave his toes a tentative wiggle. He made a face at the strange sensation of leaves tickling against his heel.

"I asked Pomona—Professor Sprout—to form your cast. She was careful to shape it away from you," Snape told him. "We were worried being too near a more complicated spell like

that would further overtax your system. The magical exhaustion and overstimulation is probably what's hurting you most right now. All we can do for that is rest. I expect you'll stay laying here until I've permitted you to leave."

Dazai turned up a brow at him. "Not the new healers?" he asked. The question had been niggling at him ever since Snape first mentioned Spleen. "They don't get a say?"

Snape narrowed a look onto him, clearly thinking the answer should be obvious. When Dazai merely sniffed, he explained, "I was under the impression you were not comfortable with them examining you. Your reaction to Spleen's presence before passing out was less than pleasant. Was I incorrect?"

Dazai looked at him. Really looked at him. The days-old clothes. The bags under his eyes. The press of his lips. Snape was sitting stiffly in the bedside chair, like he had been sitting vigil there the entire time Dazai slept. Had he been waiting for Dazai to wake? Making sure nothing bad happened to him while he couldn't protect himself? He tore his gaze back to the wooden cast around his ankle. "I would have been fine," he said.

"...right," Snape breathed after a moment. "Regardless. Those two from St. Mungo's looked over your friends, while—"

"Are they okay?" Dazai blurted before he could stop himself.

He wished he could take the words back as soon as he said them. The haste with which he had asked could only be read as sentimentality. And even if Dazai thought that was true, he also knew it couldn't be. "My subordinates didn't get too hurt, did they?" He amended quickly. Suddenly, that gap in his memory was feeling a little more urgent.

Snape stared at him, concern suddenly turning to bafflement. "Your *what?"*

"My—*oh.* Those idiots that follow me around like dogs."

Snape was looking at him now like he'd sprouted a second head. But he shook it off quickly and glowered slightly instead. *"I don't want to know what you brats get up to,"* he grumbled lowly. Dazai wasn't sure he'd been meant to hear. But he was listening. Eager to learn if— "Your friends are fine. A few scrapes and bruises between all of them, but nothing a good set of healing spells couldn't fix. It's a wonder none of you were petrified."

Dazai breathed out. Then he grinned. "We fought with our eyes closed," he told Snape, chipper.

"Yes. Mr. Zabini told me." Snape ground his teeth. "Of all the things you've done, Problem Child, surely that must be the most idiotic. Fighting a massive monster without being able to see it..."

"It worked, didn't it?"

Snape looked a bit like he was going to throttle him. Dazai, already stinging from head-to-toe, inched a little further away on the cot.

He sighed. "Mr. Zabini also told me this," here, Snape let his eyes fall to Dazai's arm where the bandages were wrapped around several times. The wound wasn't itchy, even though a couple days had passed and Dazai thought it probably should be. But whatever parts of him weren't aching were tingly and numb. "Was a scrape you got during the fight."

He paused, leveling Dazai with a significant look.

"You've just got to love Blaise," Dazai said, apropos of nothing.

Snape lifted a brow, but the rest of his face was stern. "I think we both know it wasn't an accident."

Ice froze in Dazia's veins.

Snape sighed, looking somehow more tired than he already had. Dazai had been feeling tired just seconds ago, but now it felt like all his hair was standing on edge.

"Relax, brat," Snape told him. He leaned further back into his chair, like he thought putting a more physical distance between them might help. Dazai very stubbornly did not admit that it was helping him relax. Just a little. "You aren't in trouble."

Snape's eyes turned away to the collection of potions on the shelf. Some of them, Dazai had seen Pomfrey organizing several months ago. But others were new. Or were familiar, but in strange places. Evidently, Spleen and Wiggins had taken it upon themselves to reorganize. With how random the organization seemed, Dazai bet it would take the healers days to realize if Dazai stole one. If he drank down one of the more potent ones, maybe it would kill him. At least then, he wouldn't be forced to talk with Snape about things the professor just... didn't understand.

When Dazai tore his eyes off a particular potion (he could feel it from across the room, and even though he couldn't read the label to know for sure, it certainly felt dangerous), Snape's hooded gaze had fallen to the bed curtains. Beyond them, Dazai knew, were the petrification victims.

Pomfrey and Cedric.

Dazai's victims.

"However short her tenure is as headmistress," Snape said. He was still talking at the curtain, but Dazai kept his eye on Snape. "Minerva intends to make changes around Hogwarts. Changes Albus would never permit."

Dazai frowned—still shaken by Snape's outright accusation, but mostly now confused at where he was going with this.

"Hiring a counselor chief among them," Snape said. Finally, he looked back to Dazai with a pensive look. "You won't talk to me about what troubles you. Fine. You will talk to them."

"...right," Dazai said, knowing he had no inclination to do such a thing.

Snape stare saw straight through him. "You will," he said, matter-of-fact. "And you will talk with Poppy."

Dazai's eye flicked to the curtains again. He forced himself not to look at the crack in the wall, or the floor where he'd had to scrub out his own blood or to the wrists he'd cut to draw the basilisk in. "Did Snape forget? Madam Pomfrey is—"

"The petrification cure will be complete in one week," Snape said.

Dazai's heart jumped.

One week.

One week until Pomfrey woke up and told everyone what he'd done to her. And what he'd told her.

Snape didn't seem to notice Dazai's rising panic. "After she returns to full health, Poppy intends to take custody of you. You should be able to trust her fully."

What.

"What?" Dazai gaped.

Snape rubbed at a furrowed spot between his brows. "You don't want to talk about your home life, but we aren't idiots, Problem Child. I'm too exhausted to argue with you about it right now. But there is a problem." He narrowed a look onto Dazai that could have probably meant anything, but all Dazai saw there was *I know about the Port Mafia. I know what you are.* "I refuse to sit idly by any longer. Between Poppy's reputation and Minerva's new position as headmistress, we can get you removed from Mori's care."

Out of Mori's care.

Dazai swallowed.

The petrification cure complete in one week.

Pomfrey taking him from Mori.

Heart-thudding bafflement was the only thing Dazai could feel right now. "What," he said again.

Snape's expression did something strange and twisting. He leaned forward. "Mr. Dazai. We care about you. Whatever the Port—"

The infirmary door slid open an inch. A head of ginger hair poked through. Dazai blinked dumbly at it.

A second later, the door swung open with enough force the door knob smacked! into the wall.

"Dazai!" George shouted as he burst in.

Fred was hot on his twin's heels. "Dazai is awake!"

Snape pulled back from Dazai immediately, his mouth snapping firmly shut.

Fred and George bounded up to Dazai's cot, ostensibly uncaring that their professor was clearly in the middle of a serious conversation right then. They launched themselves at Dazai and took turns giving him the same battery of tests Snape had given him a few minutes earlier.

More slowly, the rest of the gang trailed in. Blaise was the next one through, three plates of food in his hands. The second his eyes landed on Dazai's awake form, a visible tension slipped from his shoulders. "Good morning," he greeted.

Draco and Pansy followed in after him. Draco waved a grinning hello. Pansy looked like she didn't really want to be there, and, Dazai reasoned, had likely only come to accompany Draco and Blaise. Ron and Hermione came in last, carrying five plates of pancakes, sausages, and apples between them.

"Professor Snape!" Hermione jumped. She nearly dropped the plates before Draco steadied her. "I—we didn't know you would be here! *Um*... is this a. A private conversation?" She looked nervously between Snape and Dazai.

Fred and George squished Dazai's cheeks. They were beaming. Dazai didn't believe for a second that those two hadn't already known Snape would be in here. He tried to give them a scolding look, but Fred chose that exact moment to throw a hand over Dazai's eye, feeling for a fever that wasn't there.

Snape sighed. He pushed off the seat with his hands on his knees, groaning. Dazai followed the movement even as Snape cast a shadow long over his face. "It was," he said, glaring at each of them in turn. But when he turned his gaze back onto Dazai, his expression softened very slightly. Dazai turned away, cheeks pinking against his will. "But I have no energy to deal with all of you troublemakers today. I will be taking my leave."

Hermione swallowed, looking distinctly guilty. But no one else appeared at all to care about upsetting Snape's schedule. Blaise was already walking past him and sitting down in the chair.

Snape regarded them all with a stern parting look. "Mr. Dazai is still recovering. Do not overtax him. He is not to leave this room."

They all nodded seriuosly at that, and Dazai sniffed.

"As for you," Snape turned to him. "Think about what I've said. And for the love of Merlin, learn to behave yourself." With that, Snape left the infirmary.

Blaise passed one of the plates to Pansy and set another on Dazai's lap. "What were you and Professor Snape talking about?" he asked.

Dazai slapped heavily at the twins until he finally succeeded in brushing them off. They both plopped down on the bed with him. Then they took a plate each from Ron and began heartily shoveling syrupy pancakes into their mouths. "He was just catching me up on what I missed," Dazai said a little distractedly.

A week.

Madam Pomfrey.

Suddenly, Dazai's exhaustion weighed ten-fold. That long, sweet dream he'd had was at once curdled with the knowledge that he was—again—on a time limit. That he didn't have the luxury of lying around.

Blaise hummed.

"I'm just glad everything is over with," Draco said, collapsing into a seat he'd pulled up from somewhere. Dazai grumbled something like agreement. But all the while, he was thinking, *I'm not done yet.*

"Eat," Blaise said, pushing the plate against Dazai's chest again. "You must be starving."

"Not really," Dazai said. But he painstakingly pushed himself upright, regardless. Blaise held the plate steady while Dazai waited for a wave of dizziness to pass. *"Ugh."*

"Eating will help with that," Blaise told him.

Dazai glanced up at him, eyes lidded. Then, he tore off a tiny corner of pancake and shoved it into his mouth. His fingers came back sticky. Blaise only nodded, looking mildly satisfied with himself.

Everyone settled in around the room—Pansy standing grumpily over Draco's shoulder while Ron, Hermione, and Ginny settled in on the floor. It looked uncomfortable, but they were all smiling and playfully poking at one another. So maybe it was just that Dazai was uncomfortable down to his bones. "No Angel?" he asked, looking around for the rat.

Ron swallowed quickly around a sausage. "Haven't seen 'im since he followed you to the Chamber. Guess he only tags along for the interesting stuff?" He sounded a little peeved by that.

"He's probably not feeling well, poor guy," Ginny said dejectedly.

Hermione, who was carefully cutting her pancakes into thin, buttery strips, looked up to ask, "are we certain Angel is a normal rat? He doesn't exactly act normal."

Fred and George shrugged her off. *"Nah,* he's just like that."

"Appears and reappears."

"Think we see more of him at school than we ever do back home," Fred said. "Maybe that's just how rats are?"

"Scabbers was never like that," Ron pointed out. Then he shook his head and turned back to Dazai. "Professor Snape filled you in on the official side of things, but you've gotta know what we found out!"

Dazai blinked up from where he was mulishly trying to wipe the syrup off his fingers. *"Oh.* Team Two's status report. What's up?"

Fred and George perked up. They set their plates aside before diving into their retelling of events. Everyone—even the other members of Team One—listened with a serious, but unsurprising mien. They must have already heard the story before, while Dazai'd been resting. But they listened again, now, with the kind of grave severity of a person hearing a terminal diagnosis. Dazai narrowed his eye when Fred stoically told him what the St. Mungo's healers had planned for him—a fake article and a permanent stay at Azakaban—then again when they mentioned stealing Dazai's medical records. Then—

"You stole the Sensing Stone?" Dazai asked, eye bugging. "Why?"

Fred and George teetered over their answer for a moment. Eventually, it was George who said, "While we were in the office. Looking around, you know. We remembered what Hermione said."

"Oh, Dazai," Fred drew on a pitchy falsetto—evidently his terribly inaccurate impression of Hermione. *"The Sensing Stone!"*

Hermione flushed apple-red. "I did not say it like that!"

"We figured the Stone must be relevant, somehow," George said. "So we took it."

"It's in the office," Pansy told him. "Right by that chess piece you stole. By the way—what they hell is that about?"

Dazai turned up a brow. "A memento of the time I proved to Pansy I'm much, much smarter than she is."

"You—!"

Blaise lifted a hand between them, stalling Pansy before she could fly into some kind of violent rage. Then, he took the apple from Dazai's plate. Dazai blinked, baffled, as Blaise pulled the knife from his cloak and began cutting the apple into smaller, crescent-shaped pieces. "I'm more worried about Spleen and Wiggins. Will not having Dazai's records really stop them from writing that article?" He passed an apple piece across to Dazai as he finished with it. Dazai took it, feeling a lot perplexed, before deciding it was best not to question Blaise. He ate it. A few seconds later, Blaise handed him another slice.

"Probably not," Dazai mused. Then, looking around, he asked, "Where are those two, anyway? I thought for sure they'd be loitering around the infirmary trying to get an interview."

Draco actually snorted at that. "Professor Snape kicked them out."

"Yeah," Ginny said, grinning a little. "There was a whole bunch of yelling and then they had to pack up all their stuff and move into that empty classroom by Lockhart's office!"

Hermione sniffed. "It's a shame they had to move the petrification cure all the way over there, though. I kind of wanted to take a look at it. I mean, it's not everyday you get to see a professional's work!" She blinked, then said sheepishly, "N-not that I like the healers, or anything. But. Well. It is kind of impressive, the work they do when they aren't trying to send you to Azkaban, Dazai."

"Yeah, sure..."

"Dazai! Don't look like that! I could never admire those crooked healers!"

Dazai laughed, even as it ached in his lungs. Around him, the rest of the gang laughed as well. Even Pansy let out an amused sounding chuckle—one that Dazai didn't think she'd intended to make, if her suddenly grimacing expression was anything to go by.

It was nice.

It was a distraction.

They chatted like that for a few more hours. The others finished off their breakfasts quickly, but it took Dazai at least half-an-hour to quietly pick through the apple Blaise was cutting for him. Fred and George were half-way through a story about exploding pillows that sounded very familiar when Dazai started nodding off.

Blaise fixed the blanket over his shoulders and took the plate from his lap. He smiled smally. "Get some rest, Boss."

"...am resting," he replied, sluggish and petulant at once.

"You're chatting," Blaise said, as thought that weren't the same thing. He leveled Dazai with an indecipherably significant look.

Dazai shook his head, grimaced, then pressed into the pillow. It was very soft. "I have," he yawned, "stuff to do."

Hermione stood. A second later, Ron and Ginny rose as well. "The only stuff you have to do is recover."

"Yeah! You really took one for the team, Snakey."

"So relax for us all, won't ya?"

Dazai grumbled something back. He was sure he did. He still had too much to do to just... just fall asleep anytime he pleased! Dazai was thinking this, fervently, as his friends quietly slipped out of the room. As Blaise again fixed the blanket so that it was snug to Dazai's chin. As the curtains drew in around his bed.

He opened his mouth to tell someone to stay back—he would need help walking to the Hounds' office.

But the next time he blinked, Dazai's eye stayed closed.

-

Much to Dazai's dismay, he was still confined to the infirmary two days later.

"You have to rest your ankle," Ginny reminded him, looking up from the year-one essay she'd been frowning at for the last ten minutes. "Besides, you should be happy you don't have to go to classes right now. With finals coming up, everything is getting really difficult!"

Dazai grumbled. "You're a baby first-year. You don't know difficult."

Luna hummed dreamily, hung over her own papers. She'd sprawled all her things out across the cot and was currently using Dazai's blanketed legs as a table. "Really? The way I hear it, you never do assignments, Dazai. What's so difficult for you? Perhaps another exorcism?" She sounded distinctly excited at the prospect.

Dazai made a face. Luna apparently interpreted the expression as pained, because she shifted her assignments a little further from his bad ankle with an apologetic smile.

"I don't like being cooped up," he told them, eyeing the crack in the infirmary wall like it had personally wronged him. "It's too much like the kennels." Ginny and Luna both gave him odd looks at that. Dazai shook his head. "I mean, how am I meant to run rampant on the school if I'm confined to bed all the time?"

"You can't walk. What would you even do?"

"I can hobble. I'm good at hobbling."

"...right," Ginny said skeptically. She wrote something down on her essay, then said, "You should be recovered soon, right? It's just the ankle and the magical exhaustion they're keeping you for."

"Snape is being too cautious, since Pomfrey is indisposed," Dazai said with a nod to one of the neighboring cots.

Ginny looked vaguely sick at that, nervously looking off to where the petrified victims were still sleeping. But she shook herself shortly after. It was common knowledge in Hogwarts by now that the cure was nearly complete. And with the basilisk dead, there would be no more petrifications ever again. Collectively, Hogwarts had breathed out a sigh of relief.

But all Dazai felt was that he was running out of time. There were only five days left until the petrification cure was complete and Pomfrey woke up to spill all of Dazai's secrets.

"Wouldn't that hurt?"

"Hm?"

"Hobbling around on one leg," Luna said. She wasn't looking up from her papers, and was instead scrawling down something about Devil's Snare that Dazai absolutely did not recall being in the textbook. "Wouldn't that hurt? And you would break the cast Professor Sprout made you. Not to mention—"

"I'm pretty used to pain," Dazai said casually. Then, thinking of when Father had gouged into his eye and Mori had promptly led them into a waltz, added, "and I've done more with worse."

"Well, you shouldn't have," Luna said, airy. "That's awful practice. You'll only get worse if you traipse around injured. I read in the Quibbler about a girl who kept pushing herself, despite having a nasty bite on her neck. Of course, she didn't get it treated properly and the bite turned out to be a vampire's bite, so she wound up turning into a vampire. Perfectly avoidable if she'd only taken care of herself, you know."

Ginny was giving them both strange looks, now. Before she could say anything, though, there were several knocks on the door. They all looked up.

A moment later, Headmistress McGonagall walked into the room. She was followed by a red-headed man Dazai didn't know, but thought looked vaguely familiar. Dazai's eyes narrowed onto the stranger. Last time a stranger had walked into his life, it had been Spleen and Wiggins, who apparently wanted Dazai sent to Azkaban.

Ginny jumped out of her seat. "Charlie!? What are you doing here?"

The red-head—Charlie—looked a little startled at having suddenly been called out. But after a second, he smiled warmly. He strode forward and wrapped Ginny up in a hug. Realization washed over Dazai, and he felt himself relaxing. Charlie—the Weasley brother Ron had told him was studying dragons in Romania. Dazai wanted to be optimistic about why Charlie was here, but didn't have the energy for it.

Egg.

He was here for Egg.

When Charlie pulled away from Ginny, he gave a friendly smile to Luna and Dazai both. His clothes were neat, but in a practical and rugged sort of way. Like he was ready to get his hands dirty at a moment's notice. He wore brown trousers and a partially unbuttoned white dress-shirt. His shoes were muddy. It looked a little strange surrounded by everyone else, who was wearing variations of the Hogwarts uniform.

"It's a pleasure to meet you two. Mr. Dazai, I'm familiar with," Charlie greeted. He looked a little apologetic to already know about the ever-infamous Dazai, but even more guilty for not knowing Luna. "But I'm afraid I don't know you...?"

"Luna," she said. "Luna Lovegood. Or Miss Lovegood, if you want to be formal. Not Loony Lovegood or Lousy Lovegood or anything like that. Some people make that mistake."

Looking bemused, Charlie said, "Good to meet you, Miss Lovegood."

"Students," McGonagall addressed broadly. Then, she turned her full attention onto Dazai. The stare would have been a heavy one to lie under, but Dazai was used to worse. "I trust all three of you are preparing for finals?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Ginny pipped, while Luna smiled diffusely.

Dazai lifted his hands innocently, and beamed a shining smile. It was pretty obvious that he wasn't studying anything, and had actually just been alternating between chatting and napping and scheming all day. McGonagall's unamused expression saw this clearly.

"Mr. Dazai," she said. "You may have been exempted from final examinations during your first year, but I can assure you that is not the case now. Given your current grades, I will have no choice but to expel you should you not pass all of your finals."

"He's injured," Luna protested, at the same time Ginny gasped, "but he's a hero!"

McGonagall's expression did something odd. "Hero or not," her stare was still leveled into Dazai's eyes. "Albus was—*I am* receiving enough backlash for simply letting the Demon Student remain a pupil at Hogwarts. If he fails his classes, it will be out my hands."

Dazai hummed. "So I just have to ace all my exams?"

McGonagall nodded severely. Judging by the resigned look on her face, she didn't have very high hopes for him. Beside him, Ginny and Luna were now giving him worried looks as well. Dazai smiled obscurely at them.

"Do not take this lightly, Mr. Dazai," she said. McGonagall was watching Dazai sternly, and even Luna had sobered up some, having tuned away from her papers to frown in Dazai's direction. Expelled. Ginny stared at him like she expected him to burst into tears.

But honestly, he wasn't even that worried about finals. Dazai was watching Charlie instead.

Everyone else had taken on a serious mien, but Charlie—Charlie was practically bouncing in place! He rocked back on his heels and stared right back at Dazai like he was interesting.

Dazai hated that face.

Mori made that face.

His brows lowered into a glare.

Charlie startled like he had only just noticed Dazai was watching him. He frowned and rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly.

"This is Mr. Charles Weasely," McGonagall introduced. Dazai turned back to her, and she was looking between them both with a searching expression. "He is a—"

"Dragon expert," Dazai filled in. "Can I guess? If I don't get expelled for failing my classes, I get expelled for having a dragon."

Charlie shook his head, fervent. "No, no, of course not! I'm only here to take stock of the situation."

"Let's not make promises," McGonagall clipped "If Charlie finds evidence of any illegal activity regarding you and your dragon, Mr. Dazai, expulsion will be the least of your worries."

Ginny jumped, panic flashing across her expression. "Not—not Azkaban!"

Charlie and McGonagall blinked at her, looking surprised at the conclusion she'd drawn. "Surely not," Charlie said. "Repercussion, of course. But nothing like that." He sat beside Dazai on the chair Ginny had vacated a few moments earlier. He started to lean forward, then seemed to realize that would entail propping his elbows up on Dazai's stomach, and awkwardly folded his fingers over his lap instead. "Mr. Dazai," he started, "you have to understand how incredible it is that you've not only found a dragon, but that they're friendly towards you."

Dazai forced himself to sit upright. Luna may have been perfectly content to use him as a table lying down, but this conversation was too important for him not to be fully attentive. "Egg is just that kind of dragon," he said. "She's better behaved than my owl, you know."

Charlie's eyes sparkled. "But she's not!" He sounded very excited. "By all accounts, she should have killed you by now!"

Dazai grinned, even as everyone else present paled considerably. "Should I be anticipating a dragon mauling soon?" He asked wistfully. "I hadn't considered it, but death by dragon attack might be cool."

Ginny, who had at some point come to stand over Charlie's shoulder, shot him a horrified look. "Dazai!"

"What? It would." He remembered fighting off Egg just after she'd hatched a year prior. Blaise had helped to distract and contain her, and they'd both walked away from the encounter more than a little banged up. She'd been squirmy and dangerous, then. Venomous and just starting to spit sparks. Egg was bigger and stronger now. What damaged she'd managed a year ago would be ten-fold. Dazai supposed as long as Blaise wasn't also being mauled to death, Egg could have permission to kill him. Assuming No Longer Human didn't kill her first. Though that felt a little optimistic. "Well," he sniffed, "it might be messy. But if McGonagall doesn't mind cleaning up my entrails—"

"That's quite enough," McGonagall said, looking vaguely ill.

Dazai mimed zipping his mouth shut and she shot him a dull look.

She gestured for Charlie to speak. He did, though now looking more than a little off-balance. "Could you call Egg here for me? I'd like to see her for myself."

Dazai shrugged. "I don't know where she is."

"No? When's the last time you saw her?"

"Probably back," he made an incredibly vague gesture with one hand indicating anywhere from yesterday to several months ago. "You know. Hey, how often do you see dragons, mister?"

Charlie shifted in his seat. "Not as often as I'd like," he said, grinning boyishly. "Egg roams the campus freely, then?"

Dazai started to nod, and when he saw Charlie looking pleased with that, added an enthusiastic, "she's probably flying around with Featherbrain. Those two are annoyingly friendly with one another."

"Dazai's owl, Featherbrain," Ginny explained at Charlie's evident confusion. Then she shook herself, looking petulant. "Dazai's right, though. I've never seen her attack. She's really not a threat."

Charlie looked between the two of them, then offered a small smile. "It's uncommon," he said, "incredibly uncommon, but it's possible Egg may have bonded with you, Dazai."

Charlie explained to him what that meant, and told him about how it was so unheard of, bonding may well have been a myth. Dazai already knew some of the details from Hermione, but he listened with rapt attention anyway. What Charlie explained did seem to fit his and Egg's relationship; a feral dragon that hung over his shoulder, slept on the couch with him, and even brought him dead rats. Certainly, it was well beyond the typical dragon-human relationship. Which, according to Charlie, tended more towards predator and plaything.

Charlie held his hand out, palm up. "A bonded dragon will place its snout in your palm, like this. That's an absolute sign of trust for a dragon. You know she'll never leave you, if she's done that."

Dazai was already nodding before the explanation had finished. "Yeah, she's done that a few times."

Again, Charlie's eyes were sparkling with excitement. *"Oh,* I would just love to meet Egg."

"Go and find her, then. She's all yours," Dazai told him. He yawned widely, cracking his jaw in the process. "Egg is more trouble than she's worth," he said, eye flitting briefly to McGonagall. The headmistress was watching their conversation with a lidded expression.

Charlie blinked. Then, he shook his head emphatically. "No, no! I could never do that. It's—" here, he also turned to McGonagall, "—I can't seperate a bonded dragon. That's more than cruel, it's outright dangerous."

McGonagall's lips pressed into a thin line. "You're certain of this? Surely, an exception can be made. I can't have a feral dragon loose in my school."

"I'm certain. This isn't a bond that can be taken lightly." Charlie scratched his chin, drawing on his thoughts before saying. "You wouldn't take a dragon from its bonded. It's inhumane."

"Give Hogwarts another search," McGonagall instructed. When he nodded, she continued, "I want confirmation—100 percent—that this dragon is not a threat."

"It's like I said before, Ma'am. A dragon only bonds with good people. And a good person wouldn't sic their dragon on innocent students." Charlie smiled warmly at Dazai. "You're a good person, Dazai. A dragon like Egg wouldn't have you any other way."

Ginny beamed at that, and Luna nudged him with a kind smile of her own. Even McGonagall, stern though she may seem, let out a breath.

Sunlight hit Pomfrey's cot beside him.

Dazai bit his tongue until he tasted iron.

-

"I can distract Lockhart while you two sneak in. As long as you're quick—I don't want to spend more time with that guy than necessary."

Fred and George laughed.

They were all pressed up together in the cot. Dazai felt a little like a sardine in a can, squeezed in between the twins like that. Still. He wasn't uncomfortable enough to push either one of them off. He knew, if he even hinted at discomfort, they would both scurry off the bed in a second flat.

"Don't worry, Snakey. Sneaking in and stealing answer keys is old hat at this point," Fred said.

"We'll be in an out like," George snapped, "that."

"Snape, too," Dazai continued. "I can keep him distracted."

George nodded. He was laying against Dazai's blind side, staring out at the infirmary entrance. From here, Dazai could still feel the faint hint of magic coming from the door handle—a locking charm the twins had placed a few seconds after they'd arrived. Every so often, the knob would rattle. But no one entered after finding the infirmary locked shut. Dazai still laughed every time someone tried.

"That's right! You should have seen Snapey fawning over you that first day. I think he actually growled at Spleen during his examination!"

"Well," Dazai sniffed. "He's really taken to that rumor about being my dad, I guess. Unfortunately for him, I have no interest in acting the well-behaved son character."

"Problem Child," Fred snorted and Dazai shot him a dark look. Between his fingers, Fred clumsily rolled a sickle and at Dazai's glower, he fumbled. It slipped out and fell against the blankets. He made dissatisfied noise and tried again.

When the twins had first barged into the infirmary, they'd been bouncing with excitement. It was four days since Dazai first woke up. He was feeling antsy over it. And the twins were wound up over one thing or another. Sliding into the cot together hadn't calmed any one of them down. Fred didn't know any coin tricks, so Dazai had demonstrated an easy one for him, them promptly shoved a sickle into his hands. Progress was slow, but at least all of Fred's squirming wasn't shaking the cot anymore.

Dazai straightened and re-straightened the blanket over his chest while they talked. "As for the other staff," he said, "you'll need the Marauder's Map. No one else likes me enough to leave their offices for an extended period of time, even if I asked nicely."

Fred dropped the coin again with a pout. "We can pull the whole gang for this, yeah?"

Dazai shrugged. "Go nuts. Just be careful. You usually steal one test at a time. This time, I need you to steal every class final."

George whistled. "That's bound to turn some heads."

"And to make bank," Fred said. Very, very slowly the coin flipped across his knuckles. He beamed—about the money or the successful coin trick, Dazai wasn't sure. Maybe both.

"And," Dazai said, "to keep me from getting expelled. So don't let me down, Pranks and Chaos."

Fred grinned wider at the appellation, though George looked a little weary. "We won't let you get expelled, Snakey. Don't even worry about that."

"I'm not," he replied, genuine. He felt George shift at his side and said, "really. I could ace the exams right now without a cheat sheet. But that's way too much work. I'd about die from boredom."

"Not Lockhart's exam," Fred reminded him with a snicker that lost him his coin. He scrambled to catch it before it could roll onto the floor. "Who knows what that guy will put

on his final!"

Dazai made a face at that. Begrudgingly, he admitted, "you're right. Lockhart is the worst..."

What is Lockhart's favorite color?

How does Lockhart do his hair and make-up?

On what day of the week did Lockhart lose his first baby tooth, and which tooth was it?

Blah, blah, blah.

Dazai could only imagine the absurd things Lockhart was going to put on his test.

"As long as he doesn't put any more questions about me in his final. I don't think I could answer those with a straight face." Probably, he would just make good on his old threats to stab Lockhart, if that were the case. Really, what a hassle. Dazai didn't care if they were technically on the same team, since killing the basilisk. He had absolutely no desire to make nice with that guy. "Just steal what you can. If we sell well enough, I can retire early. Forget about expulsion, I'll get a nice beach house where no one can bother me again."

Fred and George barked out hearty laughter.

The doorknob shook. No one entered.

Dazai snorted when the knob shook again—and again—followed by a gruff curse.

"One of you has to teach me the locking charm later," he giggled. On the other side of the door, it sounded like Spleen was growing increasingly agitated. "It just keeps coming in handy."

"Yeah," Fred said. He flicked the coin into the air. It sparkled silver in the light before Dazai caught it and Fred pushed up to his feet. "Up until someone remembers Alohomora."

Saying this, Fred shoved a chair underneath the door handle, effectively jamming it in place.

A second later, Dazai sensed Spleen cast the unlocking charm. Only to promptly find the door still wouldn't open—blocked by a leant chair.

Spleen let out an impressive curse.

Dazai and the twins laughed.

Through sheer force of will (whining, puppy-dog eyes, and being an overall nuisance), Dazai convinced Snape to formally release him from the infirmary a sum total of six days after he'd first woken. Eight days total spent in the infirmary—Dazai thought that had to be some kind of record for longest Hogwarts infirmary stay. When he'd cheerily told his professor as much, Snape had leveled him with a significant glare. "You'd best not try to break that record again next year, Problem Child."

Next Year. Right.

Assuming he passed his classes, didn't get nailed for having a pet dragon, and also took care of Pomfrey before she woke up and told the world he'd been the one to petrify her. Not to even mention what he'd told the matron about Special Abilities.

Tall order.

But it was fine. Dazai had a plan. He always had a plan.

Still. Dazai had smiled at Snape. At least, for now, he was free again to roam the school. That was infinitely better than being cooped up in the infirmary all week. He'd spent months at a time stuck in Mori's infirmary, back in Yokohama. He'd hated every second of it, then, and continued to hate it now even with Mori notably absent.

Dazai's first stop after rediscovering freedom was the Hounds' office. The halls were completely empty as he walked over. Dazai marveled over that for a moment, but focused the bulk of his energy on not getting terribly lost—or attacked by a sudden mob of anti-Demon students. And thought he did take a few wrong turns getting there, no one was around to see. Or jump him. Dazai was counting that as a win.

Anyhow, the last thing he wanted right now was to be watched like a hawk. Even the ever-present feeling of being stared at was gone. The school felt a little eerie, empty of its students. Or so Dazai thought, anyway. Like he was trespassing. Which wasn't a problem for him, necessarily. But it did make him feel like he should be a bit more stealthy, when just walking would do fine. Empty... classes hadn't let out yet. And it wasn't like everyone was stuck inside taking their finals today. So where was everyone?

Dazai found the Hounds' office quickly enough. When he couldn't locate his gloves in his coat pocket—just a knife and Riddle's diary—he had to shove the door open using his long robe sleeves as a barrier between No Longer Human and the magic. He entered the office and blinked. "Blaise?"

Blaise looked up from his lap, where he was absentmindedly folding Dazai's blanket while skimming a propped-up textbook. He was sitting on the sofa and looked to have been there for some time. "Dazai," he greeted, getting to his feet. He set the neatly folded blanket on the arm of the sofa. "You were released?"

"I think Snape got sick of my whining," Dazai said with a small grin. He walked across the room to the desk. Sure enough, on the desk's surface was the Sensing Stone. The twins really

had stolen it. Dazai stared at it for a long moment, briefly getting caught up in the swirling, milky depths. He had to shake himself to keep from staring too long.

With deft fingers, Dazai picked the drawer lock. Not looking up, he called to Blaise, "What are you doing here all alone?"

"Oh," Blaise hummed. He watched Dazai sort through the desk drawer, but didn't say anything of it. Clearly, Dazai was a man on a mission. "There's a quidditch match today. The last one of the year."

"Yeah?" Dazai asked distractedly. "That explains the empty halls." He slipped Riddle's diary into the desk drawer—careful that Blaise wouldn't see it. In the same hand, he palmed a small, card-shaped envelope from the drawer and slid it into his sleeve.

Blaise was staring at him blankly when Dazai finally looked up. "Hermione, Ginny, and Luna are saving me—us—a seat. But I didn't want to go without you."

Dazai cocked a brow. "Don't let me hold you back."

"You're not," he said, plain, "it was my own decision. Anyhow, I had some studying to do."

"Since when does Blaise care about finals?"

"I don't."

"Just cheat, then. That's what everyone is doing these days." Dazai wiggled his eyebrows significantly.

Blaise hummed, eyes flicking lazily to the blackboard. All the doodles of Dazai slaying the basilisk had, at some point over the last week, been wiped clean. In its place, several different handwritings had begun plotting out their next answer-key heist. Following this was a scattering of proposed prices—inflated from the beginning of the year—and a list of pre-established clients.

Dazai tilted his head. "...right. Well. Thanks for waiting up, friend. But I have places to be. Things to do. Suicides to attempt. Go cheer on... which teams are playing today?"

"Gryffindor and Slytherin."

"What, again? Go cheer them both on for me."

"Come to the game," Blaise said. Dazai blinked. "With me. I want you to come with," Blaise reiterated, unbothered by Dazai's blank staring. "You've been sick all week. And before that, we were too busy to really hang out."

"All the yelling will give me a headache," Dazai said hesitantly. Because it would. And because he really needed to go permanently eliminate Pomfrey today. An empty school was about as good leeway as Dazai was going to get. But he couldn't say this aloud. Couldn't tell Blaise just how terrible he really was. How black his blood—how red his hands.

"That's an excuse," Blaise accused, blunt as ever. Dazai might have winced, if he wasn't so used to it. "If you have something else planned, I'll come for that."

Dazai's eye skipped off of Blaise's face for just a second, landing briefly on the wall mirror before turning back to his friend. His reflection barely met his gaze. "Blaise," he said.

"Dazai," Blaise returned. That flat look of his was inscrutable.

He drew on a too-cheery smile that had Blaise stumbling. "Blaise really has to stick his nose in everything, huh?" he tutted. "I didn't have any fun last time we went to a Quidditch game," he lied, still smiling very widely, "so I'm gonna skip out today. But since you're my second in command, you ought to go and cheer the gang on! That's an order."

Blaise only stared. That flat expression of his was stumbling, now, but staring all the same. His brows had furrowed when Dazai first began smiling, and only drew closer together the longer he went on. By the end of it—'*that's an order*'—Blaise's lips were pursed. He almost looked—

"Are you *angry?"* Dazai squeaked.

"Yes," Blaise said. He didn't sound angry. He sounded— "You don't trust me."

—sounded like a weapon ready to wound.

—sounded wounded, himself.

Dazai was so caught off guard by the rawness of Blaise's voice that his smile momentarily dropped. His face was flat for a short moment. Empty. Then, he drew a sharper grin onto his face as though the lapse had never occurred.

Blaise called him on it. "That's a lie. You don't have to do that."

Dazai's smile didn't falter this time. He cemented it in place. "If Blaise is trying to have another touchy-feely conversation—"

"I trust you completely," Blaise spoke over him. It was an echo of another conversation they'd had, several months ago. But now, the words rang even louder in the air. Like learning about Port Mafia had only solidified his convictions rather than melted them away. "And I know you have a near perfect memory, so I shouldn't have to say this again—but I want to go down whatever path it is you're choosing. Dark or dangerous or what else. I don't care."

He stepped forward, until he was close enough to reach out to Dazai if he so wanted. He didn't, though, only held an unwavering eye-contact. "I asked for your trust in return, and you didn't give it," Blaise continued. "I'm asking again now."

"I," Dazai swallowed around his smile. It felt strange on his face. "I trust you."

"You don't want to go to the game, because you want to do something else. Something you don't want me to know about."

Blaise always seemed to know what Dazai was thinking. "Trust—friendship—is a two-way street, Dazai."

"You," Dazai started. Again, the words seemed to catch in his throat. "If I tell you everything about me, you'll hate me for sure."

It was that lingering fear he'd always held onto. That his friends wouldn't—couldn't—be his friends if they knew the truth about him. Dazai wasn't human, after all. And he didn't have the same moral code he was meant to. And he didn't—

He didn't really belong here. Not anywhere.

Blaise moved, his hands coming to rest on Dazai's arms. He was holding Dazai still as much as he was holding him. Just—held.

"What do you want?" Blaise asked, low and serious. His eyes didn't stray from Dazai's for even a second.

Dazai didn't pull away from the hold. "I want you leave it alone."

"Not what you think you have to do," Blaise said, eyeing him significantly. As ever, Blaise could read his mind. "Not what anyone else wants you to do," he continued. "If it were just you, here. And me. Hell's Hounds."

Dazai opened his mouth, then closed it again.

What do I want..?

The coat hanging on Dazai's shoulders felt a little like a coffin. Locks clasping in place and dragging him downward. And a mirror on the wall, reflecting nothing back except for empty air and shadow bled through cracks in the floor.

I want to die, Dazai thought. But he couldn't say that. Not to Blaise of all people. And, even then... *Isn't wanting to die the same as wanting nothing at all?*

"There's nothing I want," Dazai said eventually.

Blaise sighed, sounding more tired than angry, now. The hands on his arms squeezed. The subtle pressure felt more reassuring than it should have, and Dazai could only know that if it had been Mori holding him in place, he would be near to throwing up. But not with Blaise. Never with Blaise.

"Dazai," Blaise said. "You don't *know* what you want. There's a difference. Don't," he paused to draw in another breath. And—and this close, Dazai could see that Blaise's eyes were a little watery. "Don't say that like nothing in the world could ever make you happy."

"There *is* nothing that can make me happy."

'Blaise and Draco,' Pansy had asked him all those days ago, 'are they happy? Being selfish, or whatever?'

There was another flash of anger in Blaise's expression again, beneath the watery frustration. "If you keep talking like we're nothing to you, I'm going to get really upset."

"...emotional," Dazai chided under his breath.

Blaise let out an annoyed or amused huff at that. Dazai couldn't tell. Then, he accused, "You seem happy with us. With me."

"That's different," Dazai said. He wriggled to pull out of Blaise's hold, but Blaise didn't let up. He tried again, more insistent and growing a little indignant himself. "You're all my subordinates."

"I think you know we're more than that."

Dazai bit his tongue. Blaise gave him a final squeeze before finally letting go. His fingers ghosted a trail down Dazai's bandaged arms before finally falling to his sides.

A moment of silence passed between them. It was suffocating.

The stain-glass window was caught in a thin light. Fractures of red and blue were slowly inching across the desk, the sofa, the floor and crawling towards Blaise and Dazai's shoes. It bounced off the mirror like fire. Dazai inched his shoe away from it.

"Are you happy?" Dazai asked after nearly a minute had passed.

Blaise blinked slowly at him. "I'm angry. And sad. And frustrated. And concerend. And—"

"That's a lot."

"I guess it is."

Dazai sniffed. His eye searched the mirror out again. A blaze of reflected sunlight and his own exhausted face stared back at him. The bandages over his eye looked ugly, today. "I mean, you used to not care about anything. Wasn't that easier?"

Blaise drew in a breath, but Dazai didn't turn to see him. When he spoke, his voice was low. "I suppose. You can get through a lot of life, not caring about anything. But," he waited until Dazai turned to him before continuing. It was a long pause. "But how can I be happy, if I don't care about anything? That's what I was thinking, when I started to care about you all."

"All?" Dazai asked.

"Draco, Pansy, the whole gang. But you're the reason I started to think..." he trailed off, then said more firmly, "I care about you, Dazai. I care because of you. So I think—whatever you do. Wherever you go or whatever you believe—Dazai Osamu is a good person, because he taught me how to care about the world."

"I'm not a good person," Dazai bit out. "I'm not a." He drew in a breath like gurgling blood. "I'm not even a person, Blaise."

"Dazai—"

"I'm going to kill people today, Blaise. That's why I won't go to the game with you, because I need to kill Madam Pomfrey before she can ruin me."

Blaise's eyes blew wide.

Dazai shivered to see it. He'd known it would happen, but he still—he still hoped—

A hand cupped his cheek.

"Dazai."

He froze.

"Dazai, calm down."

He didn't. He wasn't panicking, he was just. Taking a blow. Like one of Father's hits. Dazai always knew they were coming. And everytime, he would still for them. Wait for the strike to connect, then go crawling to Mori's side. Mori always fixed him.

This is the end of the line for us.

"What did I say? Dark or dangerous or what-else," Blaise's expression had softened, again. Dazai reeled to see it. "I just want to be there. That's the shape of my selfishness."

"You don't mean that," Dazai choked. "You can't be as awful as I am."

"I don't say something if I don't mean it."

"Ah..." I think I may have ruined you.

Red light snaked up their shoes and curled around their shin.

"So," Blaise said. His voice was level again. The same, casual tone Blaise spoke in during class or at lunch or over a game of chess Dazai always won. "What's the plan, Friend?"

-

The healers from St. Mungo's were set up in Quirrell's old classroom. The room was empty when Dazai picked the lock; just like Pomfrey all those months earlier, they would be at the Quidditch game looking out for injured players.

"The last game of the year is always especially dangerous," Blaise told him as he shut the door behind them, "So we don't have to worry about Spleen or Wiggins coming back early."

Quirrell's old room—the healer's room—looked the same as Dazai remembered. The walls, the floor, the lighting. Dazai's eye fell automatically to a blank spot on the tile. Last year, that was where Blaise had taken a spell for him. Where Blaise had hit his head for Dazai, and bled all over the tile. He blinked away the thought. Blaise was standing close enough right now, Dazai could feel his warmth all the way through Mori's coat.

All of the chairs and tables had been pushed out to the edges of the room to make space for a massive, gurgling cauldron. The brew was a mossy green, with pale vapors curling out from it. The air was noxiously sweet. *Roses,* Dazai thought.

Blaise sniffed, pulled a face, then turned to Dazai. "Now what?"

Dazai flicked his wrist like he was doing a card trick. A small envelope slipped from his sleeve and landed precisely in his palm.

Foxglove, read the envelope.

Blaise hummed upon reading it. "Foxglove is highly poisonous," he said, stepping forward to stand over the potion.

Dazai breathed out a sigh and followed. "The petrification cure," he said, staring down into the bubbling brew. "I'll poison it so Pomfrey can't wake up."

"None of the others will, either," Blaise told him.

The cloying stench of roses curdled the air.

Dazai shook out the foxglove onto his palm. It came out in dry, tiny flakes. He'd already ground it up a week prior. He held his hand out over the potion. It was hot on the air and singed the thin hairs on the back of his hand. Dazai didn't move for a long moment.

"Is this really what you want to do?" Blaise asked him after too long had passed and Dazai had yet to drop the poison.

Dazai glanced at him. "I have to," he said.

Blaise's stare didn't waver.

"If I don't," Dazai said, words melting off his tongue, "I'll be expelled or imprisoned. I won't..."

He trailed off.

I won't be able to see any of you again.

Then, like always, the thought travelled through the rosey air and into Blaise.

A second later, Blaise's hand rose to his. He held Dazai's hand warmly—warmer than the searing potion. He smiled smally.

Then Blaise turned his and Dazai's hands together with a light push, and tipped the foxglove into the potion.

It sparkled like sugar crystals as it dissolved.

"Together," Blaise said.

Their fingers twined together before dropping, limp. Their held-hands hung in the space between them. Dazai wondered mutely at the emotion burning in his chest.

"Together," he echoed.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: the end of Dazai's second year.

The Hero

Chapter Summary

One last job.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I can't believe we're all sitting here, celebrating together, and no one has even started a fight in," Fred glanced towards a wall-clock Dazai was sure hadn't been there yesterday, "a whole hour!"

The gang office was decorated up with balloons and streamers. Dazai supposed the twins procured them from wherever they got the party supplies for last year's post-infirmary visit party, though he couldn't rule out a more magical alternative given the environment. He didn't ask. Either way, the office was looking positively festive. Most of the balloons were tied down to the desk or sofa by thin strings, but a few had floated up into the rafters. Egg and Featherbrain were happily chirping overhead while they bounced a rainbow-colored balloon back-and-forth. Every so often, the latex would pop, and Ron or Draco would obligingly release another balloon for the pets to play with.

Pansy rolled her eyes. She was leaning into Draco's side and tearing a streamer into thin, confetti strips. "Say something like that again, and I'll start a fight right now."

"Pansy," Blaise chided her. She shot him an unamused glance.

Blaise and Dazai were, somehow, pressed in together in the office chair. It was... not an easy fit. As it was, Dazai was basically just sitting in Blaise's lap. But Blaise hadn't complained about the seating—had actually laughed when Dazai suggested it.

"What? I'm just saying."

Dazai pushed a stack of twenty sickles to the side of the desk. "No fighting, children."

"Shouldn't that be my line?" Hermione asked. She took the sickles with a smile and dropped them into her cloak pocket.

The remaining coins on the desk—an impressive mix of knuts, sickles, and galleons—were unceremoniously shoved into one of the drawers. Dazai locked it shut. George whistled as the coins disappeared. "We sure made a killing on finals."

"And that was only for second year exams!" Fred grinned. "Think how much dough we could rake in next year if we sell to everyone."

"Enough to retire early," Dazai said wistfully, and the twins laughed.

Hermione snatched a neon balloon from Ron's hands before he could pop it. "Please, you all. That's enough talk about cheating."

"Right," Ron sniffed, shooting her a look. "We're here to celebrate passing finals through our own intellect," he said sardonically.

"I passed on my own," she told him.

"Everyone else cheated. Even Dazai cheated!"

Hermione's eyes snapped to him. Dazai lifted his hands pacifyingly. "I only cheated on Lockhart's exam, I'll have you know."

"And you still got a hundred on every final?" Pansy snorted. "Yeah right."

Draco flicked her on the arm and she squeaked. "He's only smart when its to prove a point, you know."

Blaise hummed. It rumbled against the side of Dazai's face and he turned to see what expression his friend was making. "How did your practicals go, Dazai?"

"Oh," he blinked. "Fine. Thanks to our schemes, I already knew which spells I'd need to practice ahead of time. And since McGonagall is busy being a big-wig these days, she let me skip the transfiguration practical." Dazai flared his fingers out, miming something either incredibly vague or incredibly magical. "Lucky me! I'd have failed that test for sure, and gotten expelled."

Ron snorted. "How come you always luck out of finals, 'zai? You've gotta teach me how to do that. I just about failed potions..."

"It's about the puppy dog eyes! See—" Dazai batted his lashes Ron's way. Ron snatched the balloon back from Hermione and threw it at him. Before it could hit Dazai in the nose, however, the helium lifted it up and away, where Egg pounced on it with an excited growl. "Anyway," Dazai said. He stood. Blaise made an uncomfortable noise as he pushed off. "That's a wrap on Hell's Hounds first big job. Good job, team."

Cheers rose up around him—the twins were the loudest among them. They were still hovering near the blackboard, which was written up with their final sales figures. They'd made a lot. A hefty sum went to each member of the gang, and a larger pool went into Dazai's desk. Call it the Hounds' funding for a rainy day.

Dazai grinned to each of them in turn. Triumphant. He was decidedly feeling triumphant.

Mori had told him the gang was a weakness and a waste of his time. But they'd not only pulled off a very successful business scheme, they'd also come to his aid without needing to be asked. And that wasn't a weakness by anyone's standards. And Blaise! That kind of loyalty was beyond even that of Port Mafia members. Dazai still didn't really know what to say about

it. But he knew it was stronger than whatever Mori had mocked him over at the beginning of the year. He knew Hell's Hounds was stronger than what Mori had thought they were.

Dazai was beaming when he turned to Pansy. He beamed even wider when he saw she was pouting. He pulled something small from his cloak and tossed it to her.

She caught it with both hands, then unfolded her palms to see—"What is this?"

"Is Pansy getting more stupid by the day?" Dazai asked. "It's a king piece."

Pansy squinted at the tiny, wooden white king in her hands. Draco shifted to sit upright and peek at it as well. The piece should be familiar to her—it was the one she'd played a few weeks ago. The one Dazai had promptly stolen. Pansy turned it over in her hand. "Don't give me that, idiot," she snipped. "I mean what are you doing throwing it at me?"

When she held the king aloft, a cord of twine hung off of it at a limp angle. The twine was wrapped four times around white king's crown.

"It's a necklace," he told her, "and your joining gift for Hell's Hounds. This way, no matter where Pansy goes, she has to think of how much smarter and cooler than her I am!"

"You—!" Pansy raised her arm to throw the king back at him. Draco put a hand on her elbow before she could, and Pansy grumpily dropped her arm. "Fine," she said. "Whatever. Thanks, I guess."

"You're welcome!" Dazai grinned sharkishly. "You have to put it on, otherwise you're not really a member. And feel free to tell everyone who asks about it that you lost a game of chess to me."

"I was having an emotional crisis! It didn't count!"

"What about that first game then, *huh?* You lost then, too."

"Th-that doesn't count either! I thought you were some loser muggle so I went easy on you!"

Pansy was red-faced from yelling, but Dazai noticed she still put the necklace on without further argument, regardless.

They were interrupted from further bickering by a sudden alarm of *knock-knock-knock!* at the door.

The gang all shared a look. Then, as one, everyone turned to Dazai in askance. "Ginny," Dazai told them—because really, who else could it be?—just as the door flew open and Ginny hurried through.

She was gasping out heavy breaths as she shut the door at her back.

Fred and George rushed to her side instantly. They looked Ginny up-and-down for wounds in the same way they'd done to Dazai several times over the last two years. He crossed the room to her much more slowly.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Ginny drew in a shuddering breath before swallowing hard. She looked to each of then, then said to the floor, "I just heard—I came right here—it's—"

"Woah there, Ginny-Winny," Fred patted her hard on the back. "Breathe," George told her.

Ginny did. It seemed to help a little.

"The—" she drew in another gasp of settling air, "the petrification victims. *Th-they're all dead!"*

Silence.

A hollow, shattering silence.

Dazai could feel it under his skin.

A ragged series of gasps flew around the room. Hermione's hands flew to her mouth in horror. Even Featherbrain and Egg briefly stopped their playing, sensing the severe reality settling around the rest of the room.

"I thought the healers were going to, well, heal them," he said, folding his arms over his chest. He said nothing of the poison he and Blaise had administered. Nothing of the secrets Pomfrey had held over him. And he felt no triumph, either. Just a cold kind of completion over a job well-done. Beside him, Blaise bodily froze and Dazai elbowed him. And it was clear by everyone's shocked faces that they were all too alarmed by Ginny's news to read the invisible tells on Dazai's and Blaise's faces.

"They were," she said, frantic and shaking, still. "But they—I don't know what happened. But the rumors—the petrification cure was poisoned!"

Fred patted Ginny's back again. "Sit down, sis," he said, shoving her very gently towards the sofa. "You look like you're gonna fall over."

"I am," she gasped.

She followed all the same. Draco and Pansy had jumped off the sofa upon hearing Ginny's news, and didn't object when she curled up into a tiny ball where they'd just been sitting. Ginny drew in several more calming breaths—Hermione whispering out coached breathing exercises into her ear until she heeded them. Everyone was gathered around the sofa when Ginny finally continued her story, "I was with Percy when we heard. Madam Pomfrey, and—and every one." Ginny's fingers tugged at a blanket's edge. A few threads frayed out. "At first, everyone was shouting a-about the Demon Student."

She shot an apologetic look Dazai's way when he tensed. Draco nudged him reassuringly, misinterpreting Dazai's reaction as one of being falsely accused.

"Percy defended you! And Gemma, too."

Dazai blinked. "Gemma? Gemma hates me."

"Yeah!" The twins gaped. "She wants Dazai expelled."

"She wants him in Azkaban," Ron corrected with grinding teeth.

Ginny choked out a cry at the word Azkaban, and everyone's eyes shot back to her.

"Oh, stars. Dazai isn't going to Azkaban, is he?" Hermione said. "They don't really think he...?"

"No!" Ginny shouted.

Hermione let out the tiniest sigh of relief at this news. But she was somber again a moment later.

Dead.

Four dead.

It was Dazai's fault. Dazai's and Blaise's. But everyone here was so quick to defend him. To see his innocence. He'd manipulated them all into thinking he was a good person. Into thinking he was a person at all—

Dazai chased the thought away quickly. "So what happened?" he asked.

Ginny shook her head, shaking away some darkening thoughts of her own, perhaps. "Gemma told the staff that she'd seen the healers. *Um.* Professor Spleen and Assistant Wiggins?" Dazai and Hermione nodded to confirm the names, while the others looked on in horrified silence. "Gemma told everyone that she'd seen them working on the petrification cure. Or—or *not* working on the potion. All the things we overheard the other week in the infirmary, you remember that?" Ginny waited for everyone to nod before continuing wetly. "The healers have been so busy trying to slander Dazai they've been messing up the cure. Gemma told everyone she saw them spilling it, or exploding it, and making it smell strange like it probably shouldn't!"

(The petrification cure had smelled of roses. The stench clung to Dazai's nostrils even now.)

"So the healers messed up the potion and accidentally gave the petrified people a poison," Blaise surmised. To the outside ear, he sounded expressly calm. But to Dazai, who knew Blaise as well as he knew any page of his textbooks, heard the undercurrent of tension in his voice.

Ginny nodded, and Draco worried the skin of his lip. "What's going to happen to them?"

"A-Azkaban," Ginny stuttered out the word like a curse. "Prof—Headmistress McGonagall said they'll probably go to Azkaban."

Ron did curse. A loud, *"Hell!"* bursting from his lips.

Hermione shot him a look, but didn't scold him for it. There was no denying the severity of Ginny's news. "Their incompetence killed a matron, two students, and a familiar. Azkaban is hardly an excessive punishment."

"Still!"

"Oh, it's just terrible!" Ginny croaked. A second later, she burst out into terrible sobs. She hid her face behind her hands and wept loudly even as the twins fell into the seat beside her and held her in a hug.

"Damn." Pansy whistled. Despite her casual remark, however, Dazai saw the way her hands were shaking before she shoved them into her cloak. "That's a hell of a way to end the year."

"Pansy," Hermione warned, whirling a glare onto her.

For once, Pansy didn't bite back. She only looked to Draco imploringly. He muttered something low to her. A quiet comfort, Dazai suspected. Pansy mumbled something back.

Something nudged Dazai's side. He glanced up to see Blaise watching him with searching eyes.

We aren't suspected, the expression seemed to say. *We're good,* he said. *We're good, aren't we?*

Dazai didn't smile—didn't want to blow the cover his gang had given him—but he did nod shallowly. He cleared his throat. Everyone looked to him—save for Ginny, who was still hiding her sobs behind two shaking hands. "We killed the basilisk. We did a good thing," he told them. The voice of a boss was a heavy one. Heavy as Mori's coat and heavy as the truth he and Blaise were tucking in their back pockets. Here was Ginny, still blaming herself for what Riddle had made her do. And the rest of his gang, sullen over a series of deaths that had nothing to do with them and everything to do with *him.* A few words of consolation were all a guilty boss could offer their subordinates. "What happens after the basilisk has nothing to do with us."

Draco's brows furrowed.

Ginny cracked out another sticky wail.

And Blaise was the loyal dog sitting vigil at his side.

Severus' fingers dug in and out of the infirmary blanket like claws. The bed was empty. All the beds were empty.

The Ministry and a few St. Mungo's staff had swarmed the infirmary early that morning and cleaned the place out. They'd been a storm. A hurricane of crime-scene cleaning. Everything Spleen and Wiggins had used—everything they'd even so much as looked at—had been confiscated.

"For the trial," a Ministry official with a curling mustache had told him while they levitated the body of Collin Creevey into the air. The body had been floated over to another official, who'd used a spell to teleport it who knows where. "We'll need it as evidence."

Evidence.

Severus' eyes were too dry from blank staring to water over with tears anymore.

Evidence of murder.

Every cot in the infirmary was empty. Just yesterday, they had all been filled up with petrified victims awaiting their cure. And now—

Severus choked on something stone-like in his throat. The blanket he was clawing into had been on Poppy's body while she'd died.

Every since the news had reached him—the deaths—Severus felt as though he were trodding through thick mud. He couldn't breathe. His lungs were full of ichor and iron. *Dead, dead, dead—!* He'd only had enough sense of mind to take stock of what the Ministry had collected from Poppy's things. Potion ingredients, a few files—none of them Mr. Dazai's, curiously, but Severus had checked.

The small light hitting Poppy's cot felt cold.

"Severus."

He tore his eyes off the empty space and found Minerva standing tersely at the door. Her face had worked up into a blank frown when the bodies had first been discovered and had yet to soften into anything kinder since. "You can't sit here all day," she told him, slowly crossing the room. Her eyes briefly flicked to the empty beds before turning back to Severus. "I know you're close to—you were close to Poppy. But sitting in here all day neglects our work as professors."

Severus' lip curled. "She was my friend."

Minerva looked guilty. "She was mine as well. And any other circumstances, I would grant you leave for the grieving process. But Severus, my position as interim headmistress is new. And it is not one brought on by gentle times. Hogwarts is facing one crisis after another and I cannot have the staff neglecting their duties. Not now."

Severus wanted to bark at her. To bite. To scream about the injustice of what Spleen and Wiggins had so carelessly done, but—

But what was the point?

He deflated into the chair. It was the same one he'd sat in for days, hovering over Mr. Dazai's cot like some worried mother hen. But Dazai had gotten better. Poppy would not. (He would never see her again. No one would.)

"There are no words for a tragedy like this," Minerva told him. Her voice edged on gentle, but still sounded cold to Severus in ways he could not know. "But we must remain focused. The Daily Prophet is all over us already. We need not give them more reason to slander Hogwarts."

"Let them," he grumbled harshly.

"Severus," she chided.

He sighed. "...I know. The students leave campus tomorrow morning. I will manage one more day with them before taking my own leave."

Minerva nodded. "Good. Thank you."

The infirmary blankets had always felt exceptionally soft to Severus, but now, blistered under his digging fingers, he thought only that they were *empty, empty, empty.*

He shook himself. Minerva was right. There was no time for spiraling right now. After the students left, he could grieve in peace. But until then, the Daily Prophet was still on Hogwart's back. Severus wouldn't give them anything to pounce on.

He rose to his feet with a groan. How long had he been sitting there, beside an empty bed? It felt like no time at all—a blur of fog and misery in his brain. But his knees creaked like several hours had passed. Severus didn't know. Minerva offered him a hand up that he ignored, instead looking to the office to catalogue, again, the damages. The door was ajar—left that way by the officials who'd searched it for evidence. Severus had bristled during the entire search. His blood was screaming at him, *No Trespassing! Poppy has a no trespassing rule for her office.*

The Ministry hadn't cared, and Severus amended his thought with burning acid, Poppy *had* a no trespassing rule.

The office door was left open, now. What was the point?

Minerva followed his stare. She cleared her throat. "The Ministry raided the place for anything St. Mungo's looked at. Potion ingredients, mostly." She glanced at him significantly. "I checked everything they took before it left the office. Mr. Dazai's file wasn't confiscated."

Severus ground his teeth down. "Why not?" She lifted a brow at him, and he expanded, "We know those two were investigating Mr. Dazai. Why didn't they look at the boy's file?"

Minerva blinked, then sighed. "The Ministry certainly looked for Mr. Dazai's file. Apparently, they couldn't find it."

Weariness kept Severus from startling terribly, but he still couldn't shake how his stomach clenched. "That's..."

"Not good. I know," Minerva blew out another breath. She looked—sounded—deeply exhausted. More so than Severus, even. Responsibility and grief weighed on her like the overbearing coat Dazai always wore these days. Despite himself, however, Severus couldn't find it in himself to console her. "I will search Poppy's office after the students leave—"

Severus lifted a hand to cut her off. "No need. I'll do it now."

"Now?" She asked. "You need to finish grading finals and getting the students ready to return home for summer."

He scowled, lips pinching meanly as he walked past the empty cots and Minerva to the open door. Stepping across the entrance without Poppy's permission felt like a sin. "It's not just Mr. Dazai's file I'm looking for," he told her. Severus heard the *click-clack* of heels follow behind him, but they stopped just shy of entering the office with him. "Returning home—that's the problem."

He heard Minerva fold her arms over her chest before looking up to see her frowning face. Severus braced a palm against Poppy's desk. How many times had they laid out books, here? Discussed their problem child together? How many more times would they have, if..?

He tugged against a locked drawer. Poppy's magic was layered over it. "Poppy was the only one of us to ever do something about Mr. Dazai's situation," he said, withdrawing his wand to unlock the drawer. It sprung open with a flash of magic. Stacks of official-looking papers were hidden within—Ministry documents, case precedent, child welfare. "She was going to adopt him."

Minerva stood straighter. "...Just what are you getting at, Severus?"

"She can't help him anymore." The papers crinkled underneath Severus' grasp. He forced himself calm to keep from tearing them. "Only I can."

"You—" Minerva stop-started. Her eyes were wide when she finally crossed into the office. "You don't mean *you're* going to adopt the boy? Severus, I don't have to tell you how horrible of an idea that is. The Daily Prophet is already claiming nepotism."

Severus slammed the papers down.

They fluttered out from impact. Minerva caught one before it could fall to the floor. *'Ministry Contacts for Muggle-Related Abuse Cases,'* it read.

"What the hell else am I meant to do?!" He shouted.

Minerva looked taken aback. She set the page down gently. "Severus, you need to calm down. It has been a horrible day. Making rash decisions—"

"And do nothing again? Let the boy go home to be hurt—or worse! What if he dies too, Minerva? Because Poppy couldn't—because I couldn't help him."

"You're catastrophizing—"

"I'm being realistic," he growled.

The papers stared up at him, the beginning stages of Poppy's research before she'd been petrified. *Abuse,* it yelled up at him, *abuse, abuse, abuse.*

"I don't need your permission to do this."

Minerva's frown briefly turned heavy with anger. But it was replaced with a kind of resignation a moment later. Severus almost felt bad for snapping, but made no effort to take the biting words back. He had said them and he had felt them true.

"...No. You don't. I know Albus would have disliked you stepping in," she hedged, then shook her head to dismiss the idea altogether.

Severus looked away. To the shelf where Poppy had collected books on Magical Sensitivity, to the table where she'd kept the Sensing Stone (it was missing, as well. Severus hadn't seen them cart it off with the other evidences, but it was hardly Hogwarts' property in the first), to the papers again. Without Poppy here, the whole room felt empty. The books and documents and files lacked any sense of meaning or organization. It was just Severus and Minerva and a bunch of pointless *things.*

At least he could do this. The one thing he could grasp between his hands.

Poppy's final wish: *Save Dazai Osamu.*

"I have to do this," Severus said solemnly. "I want to do this."

For Poppy. For Dazai. For himself.

I have to do something. Just one good thing.

Sitting still had become unbearable to him.

Minerva looked on skeptically, but held her tongue. And the soft light of the infirmary, for the first time in all the years Severus had been at Hogwarts, felt unrepentantly cold. His shaking fingers wrinkled Poppy's notes.

Dazai would deny it if anyone asked, but he'd dragged his feet all the way to the train. The last day of his second year. After today, Dazai wouldn't see his gang again for several months. Mori didn't make for half the company. When they all sorted into two compartments —the gang was too big these days to all squeeze into just one—Dazai realized he wasn't the only one dragging.

Draco stared out the window, a tight look to his face as he watched the country-side flash by them in a blur. "I can't believe the year is already over."

"Already?" Dazai asked. He had pulled his knees up to his chest to make room for Featherbrain's cage on the floor. Blaise was pressed up to his side, and George pressed up to Blaise's. "Between the petrifications and all that Demon nonsense, it felt like this year dragged on for ages."

Blaise nudged his side. The gesture wasn't really necessary. They were already pressed so close together, Dazai could feel his friend's breath against his neck. "That's only because you don't know how to stop sticking your nose into everyone else's business."

"I know how to stop, I just don't."

George tittered. "Dazai just has a prankster's heart! Like me an' Fred!"

He gestured wildly—nearly smacking Blaise in the face—probably indicating something about his twin. Unfortunately, Fred hadn't been able to squeeze into the compartment with them. Fred, Ginny, Hermione, Ron, and Luna were in the adjacent compartment, instead. It saved on breathing room, but Dazai still thought it was a shame they couldn't all be together at the end of things.

"He's got *something,"* Pansy scoffed derisively.

"Undeniable charm," Dazai told them, "and an appreciation for hanging around where I'm not wanted."

Pansy kicked his shin from across the stall. "You aren't wanted here. Go sit with the other losers."

Featherbrain screeched when the kick rattled her cage. Pansy, pouting, pulled her feet back under her seat.

"And leave you here without my brilliant presence? I'll pass."

She scoffed. It almost sounded amused if Dazai strained his ears.

A field passed them by as a blur out the window. Trees and crops and some white dots Dazai thought might be sheep. He stared out at them for a moment, feeling Blaise bumping up against him as they rolled over the train tracks.

"So," George hummed, "What is everyone doing over break? Me an' Fred have some wicked pranks planned for Mom and Dad. And we've got a bunch of ideas to test out before we start fifth year."

"Color-changing jelly-beans aren't enough for you?" Pansy asked, sounding exasperated.

"That's just the start of it!"

In the window's reflection, Dazai met Draco's eyes. He lifted a brow. Draco sighed. "...I don't know."

"You don't know?" George asked.

Draco finally turned away from the window to stare somewhere near Dazai's feet. "I made it pretty clear I'm *Team Dazai* this year. There's no way my Father is happy with me."

Pansy made a face. She grabbed Draco's hand in hers and squeezed. "I'll be over for the next Malfoy party. You can hang in until then, right?"

Draco said nothing.

"...is you're old man really that bad?" George asked. When Draco and Pansy both shot him a scathing glare, he raised his hands appeasingly. "I mean, I think he's a rat! But that's a Weasley speaking."

Blaise looked between them. "Draco's father can be very strict," he informed. Then, to Draco, "you've never stepped this far out of his boundaries before, have you? It's difficult to say how he'll react."

"I won't let him do anything to Draco," Pansy growled.

Dazai watched the field turn into a forest. The train blasted through it, cracking over fallen branches and pine needles. "Sic Egg on Lucius if he tries anything."

Draco glanced at him. "Assuming she even comes home with me."

"I saw her hop on the train roof before we left. She's coming home with one of us."

Draco sniffed. Then, a little amusedly, he said, "as long as she doesn't pick Ron."

George laughed. "I'll tell my baby bro you said that!"

"Tell him he's a second-rate Quidditch player while you're at it."

Dazai turned away from the forest when it got too dim to make out anything properly. To Draco, he said, "if you're so worried about Lucius, you can just tell him I want you kept in one piece. He'll listen to that."

Draco swallowed, and the rest of the Loyalty Club shared a hasty look. Meanwhile, George did a double-take. "What? Why? Are you and Malfoy Senior in cahoots, Dazai?"

"Nah," he dismissed, lying easily with a wave of his hand. "But Lucius is pretty fixated on his public image." He turned back to the window. Dark. "Don't worry about it."

"Everytime you say something like *'don't worry about it'* I get a little stress headache," George tapped the side of his head. "And then I super worry about it."

"Join the club," Draco grumbled.

"Just keep in touch," Pansy nudged Draco. "I want at least one letter a week until all this stupid Dazai nonsense blows over!"

"This stupid what-now?" Dazai blinked.

"Yeah," Draco obliged. Then, to Dazai and Blaise, he said, "Same goes for you two."

"Aw, what about me?" George pouted.

"I barely know you," Draco said. His eyes didn't waver from Blaise and Dazai.

Blaise tilted his head. "Sure. I'll see you at the Malfoy Summer Charity Gala as well."

They all turned to Dazai, expectant. He shrugged and hugged his knees to his chest. "I'll see what I can do."

"Not to have absolutely zero faith in you, Boss," George leaned forward in his seat so he could make out Dazai's expression better. "But you totally went ghost-mode last summer. No letters, no visits, no nothing!"

Dazai lifted a brow. "Yokohama is pretty far away, you know. And I've got other stuff going on."

Other stuff being that Mori hadn't wanted him talking to his Hogwarts friends. And sitting vigil with Father had taken so much of his time. Between that, the kennel, and the infirmary...

"Ooh, Dazai's mysterious *other stuff!"*

"At least manage a letter or two," Blaise said plainly. "Otherwise I'll worry."

"You'll worry anyway. Blaise is a worrywart."

Blaise nodded. "So you'll write. For me."

Dazai's nose scrunched up. "I absolutely did not say that."

Blaise looked at him imploringly.

Beside him, George suddenly burst out into laughter. He wiped at a teary eye. "Hey! Looks like Blaisey can do a mean puppy-dog eyes, too! Dazai's got some real competition now!"

Pansy snorted and Draco's lips curled up in distinct amusement. Looking between all of them —and pointedly ignoring Blaise's sparkling eyes—Dazai squawked. He threw an arm out

over his eye. "No way! Blaise knows I can't say no to him, this is just no fair at all!"

Everyone laughed. It felt light.

The train burst out of the woods and into the sun again. Dazai knew where they were now. He'd ridden the train enough to know they were nearing the station. *In a few minutes, this would be...*

"Fine, fine. I'll write as long as it makes Blaise happy. But only because of that."

The corners of Blaise's eyes wrinkled brightly. "Thank you, Dazai."

"Yeah, yeah."

"I think we've finally found Dazai's weakness: Blaise's puppy-dog eyes!"

Draco huffed out a dry laugh. "His weakness is Blaise, plain and simple." He looked them up-and-down, eyes trailing over them. "I swear, every time you two wander off, you come back even closer than before."

"Draco is jealous I won't hold his hand, too," Dazai chirped, twining his fingers with Blaise teasingly.

"It's freaky," Pansy said. "Next time we see you two you'll be joined at the hip."

Dazai shoot his head firmly, the emphatic gesture wiggling his and Blaise's hands a little. "No way! If we connect like that, Blaise will die with me. That's just too cruel."

"Die with you?" George coughed. "What exactly are you planning now?"

"Bungee jumping without the cord? Sky-diving without a parachute? I haven't decided yet."

Blaise squeezed his hand. "Just write to me over break," he said, speaking over the way George's eyes had blown wide with concern. "All the time."

"All the time? You're awfully clingy."

"Well, I'll write you every day if you don't."

"...you're going to wear your owl out at that rate."

Slowly, underfoot, the train's *clack-clack-clack* over tracks began to peter out. The rumble died away into a whistling draw then stopped completely. The train had pulled into the station. Dazai looked away from his friends to glance out the window. People were gathered outside—family of students, he thought. Though...

"Oh, snap," George whistled. "That the press?"

Cluttered around the station were at least a dozen wizards wearing cameras around their necks, holding quills and notebooks, looking altogether too official for Dazai's liking. The

bright-red lipstick of one Rita Skeeter stood out like a bloody beacon among the masses. Dazai slid down his seat until only the tips of his hair poked out above the window. "What's the likelihood they're all here to bother someone else?"

Pansy leant over Draco's lap to look out at the crowd of reporters. She scoffed. "Like who?"

"Maybe it's for you, Pansy. After all, you gave a report to Rita Skeeter at the end of last year, didn't you? She must be looking for another scoop."

"Wha—how'd you know about that?!"

"I have sources. Also, I can read."

Draco nudged Pansy off of him and stood. "Yeah. Well. No one is talking to the press today."

"So confident," George mused. "What's the plan?"

"Run past them?" Blaise offered. He was glaring out the window.

"Wouldn't running just draw more attention?" Pansy hummed. "I say we throw Dazai to the wolves. At least we'll keep Draco out of the papers that way."

Dazai sniffed. "That's an awful idea. I think Pansy should volunteer to talk to the press."

"I'll tell them how much of an idiot you are. I'll tell them you suck at magic and you're even worse at chess."

Dazai gasped and whirled on Draco. "Pansy is bullying me again! Draco, put her on a leash or something!"

"Okay, kids. Let's focus up," George tried, smiling a little despite himself. He reached into his jacket—they'd changed from their robes about an hour earlier; everyone into more comfortable clothes except for Dazai's mafia get-up and Draco's stuffy, rich-kid attire. A moment later, he pulled out—

"How many of those things did you make?" Dazai blinked.

A glitter bomb.

"Uh," George rolled his wrist, twirling the glitter bomb around haphazardly. Pansy leaned away like it might save her from an accidental glitter mishap. "This is the last one, actually." He made a face, then shook it off with a grin. "We were planning to take it home and use it as a basis for a new prototype. But. *Eh.* This is as good a cause as any."

Pansy stood next to Draco, and a second later the others joined. It was still a tight fit, and they spilled out into the corridor just to have breathing space between them all. "Just," she said, expression curdling, "don't get any on me."

"That's right, Pansy wasn't there either time Fred and George blew these things up," Dazai hummed. He fixed the coat hanging over his shoulders where it had rumpled during the long

trip. It was too hot to be wearing the coat. He wouldn't take it off. "That's a really hopeless request. If we use this, everyone at the station is going to walk away covered in glitter."

Pansy shot him a dirty look.

Students shuffled past them in the hall, moving nervously past Dazai's group of obvious trouble-makers. After another few seconds past, the compartment adjacent theirs opened. Hermione's head popped out. When she saw them all gathered there, her brows furrowed worriedly. "Thank goodness you haven't left yet! Did you see al the reporters out there?"

"Dunno how you're gonna get out of here without an interview, mate," Ron shrugged, coming out into the hall beside Hermione.

Ginny and Luna followed after. Fred came out last. The second his eyes landed on his twin—on the glitter bomb he still held aloft—Fred grinned ear-to-ear. "Just what I was thinking, brother-mine!"

"Two peas in a pod, us!" George tittered.

Hermione took a purposeful step away from then, aligning herself with Pansy by the wall. *"Oh,* I want nothing to do with whatever you're planning this time!"

"Count me out, too," Pansy said. She shot a wry look to Hermione. "For once, we agree on something."

"I doubt it will ever happen again," Hermione said, grimacing.

"Here's to hoping. I want nothing to do with you."

Dazai rocked back on his heels. "Keep talking like that and I'll have to assign another team-building exercise."

Hermione looked aghast, though Pansy only glared at him. Typical.

"Alright, kiddos," Fred and George said. They clapped their hands on as many shoulders as they could reach between the two of them—Dazai, Blaise, Ron, and Ginny—and pulled them into an almost conspiratorial huddle. "Let's save the bickering for after our great escape!"

"You mean several months from now? After summer break ends?" Pansy deadpanned. "That's a really idiotic thing to say."

Fred continued, like she hadn't said anything at all. "George'll throw the bomb, and we'll all make a break for the exit."

"Everyone got their things?" George asked as he handed his own suitcase over to Fred. He was only holding the glitter bomb now.

Dazai hefted Featherbrain's cage into his arms while everyone else shifted their belongings in their arms for better carriage. "All set," Dazai said after a moment.

They turned towards the door—still open, but no longer bleeding out students. Their extended conversation, in combination with their less-than stellar reputations had kept most of the other students from lingering long.

Dazai sniffed. "Guess this is goodbye, then."

Blaise squeezed his hand. "Just for a bit. You're going to write to me, so it won't be that long."

"Long enough!" Fred and George whined. "It sucks the gang has to split when we were just starting to get together!"

"Oh," Luna pipped. She wrapped her arms around Ginny's waist and leaned into the girl's shoulder. "A gang. I've always wanted to join a gang."

"You should!" Ginny beamed.

"Hey, hey. This isn't an open club, you know," Dazai drawled.

"It isn't a club at all, Boss," Draco told him.

"Boss! *Oh,* that's very charming," Luna hummed. "May I call you Boss as well, Dazai? Perhaps I could have a cute title in this gang, as well. I'm partial to—"

"Okay, okay, that's enough dawdling," Fred said with a pleasant laugh.

George wiggled the bomb. "Time's a wasting."

"Right," Dazai stood straighter. He gave Blaise's hand one last squeeze before letting go. He rubbed his palm off on his coat, itchy with an empty feeling. He turned a sparkling grin onto the gang. "It's the end our second year as a gang. Let's go out with a bang, shall we?"

Fred and George *whooped!* Everyone bounced on their heels, ready to sprint. And even Hermione was grinning a little.

"Here we go, then. You wanna count us off, Boss?'

"Nah," he hugged Featherbrain to his chest. Time to run! "Just give it your best throw."

George's smile split ear-to-ear. He cocked his arm back, paused for a breath, then threw. The glitter bomb arced through the air. It shot out above the swarm of reporters with a *whiiiiiizzzz*
—

"Run, Hounds, run!"

—POP!

Glitter exploded out across the train station.

Instant kaleidoscope pandemonium!

Dazai and Blaise burst out of the train first, laughing madly as they did so. The others followed just behind in a clatter of laughter and footsteps.

Reporters shouted and students screamed and everything was a brilliant, giggling rainbow. Featherbrain kicked up a hooting fuss. The train whistle blew. Somewhere, Rita Skeeter cussed out every magical creature from A to Z. It was exhileratingly bright!

Dazai was still laughing when he leapt through the magic wall to the muggle world.

And then—!

A brick wall. A squirm of magic.

Grey.

This side of the world was so grey.

Dazai's giggles petered off in a breathy sigh.

He stood there for a few moments, just settling his breathing and holding Featherbrain to his chest. This side of the station was no less busy than the magical side had been. Except, these people were ordinary. Magicless. They were suits and carried briefcases and held phones up to their ears. And they gave the half-crazed, laughing Dazai strange looks for having an owl.

Right.

Dazai forced his shoulders square. Forced a look of calm over his face.

His friends were on the other side of the brick wall, still. Looking for their own families to take them home. Dazai's eye skipped across the sea of ordinary faces. Strangers, all of them.

It didn't take long for him to find his transport. Amidst the taxis, vans, and cars, there was only one stretch black limousine. Port Mafia make. Dazai steeled himself for the crowd and picked his way over to it. He didn't bump into anyone on the way—possibly because he was being quick, or possibly because his expression was closing off the closer he got to Yokohama. Dazai opened the door and slid in.

"Welcome home, Dazai," Hirotsu greeted him.

Dazai shut the door and immediately the engine started underneath him. The limo pulled out and began driving at once. But the windows were blackened, and Dazai had no way of knowing which way they turned or at what speed. It was dark. The limo smelled strongly of cigarette smoke.

He set Featherbrain's cage down in the seat beside him, heedless of how Hirotsu would need to scooch over to make space. She let out a hacking chirp. "She doesn't like the smoke," Dazai told the limo broadly. Finally away from the buzz of magic, he took off his gloves. He shoved them into a coat pocket.

Hirotsu pressed a small button on the door, rolling down his window by a crack. A small sliver of sunlight landed on the seat by Dazai's knee. "My apologies."

Dazai hummed. He said nothing.

A moment of silence passed between them. The limo turned a smooth corner. Dazai stared blankly out the window crack, but made out only the peaks of buildings. He didn't know where this was.

He held his own hands in his lap.

Something moved. Dazai looked down from the window. Hirotsu had an arm outstretched to him. Held in his hand was a loaded pistol.

"What's that for?"

Hirotsu waited until Dazai had taken the gun from him. He felt it in his bare hand, the gravel of the hilt, the shine of the barrel. He flicked the safety on and off, on and off.

"A job from the boss. You will be taking care of one final loose end before we return to Yokohama."

Dazai hung his head over the gun. "I could just shoot myself now, instead. Save myself the trouble."

"...do not do that."

"I won't." Dazai sighed. He looked past Hirotsu and back to the black of the window. "About this mystery job—what's so important it can't wait another day?"

An old brick building blotted out the sun.

-

The limousine pulled to a final stop several hours later. Hirotsu exited first, holding the door open for Dazai and dipping his head in a respectful bow.

Dazai stepped out onto crushed gravel and pine needles. The sun was lower, now—a burning red halo turning the lake the color of hellfire. Dazai had to look away or risk damaging his only remaining eye. He looked inland where a brick cottage was tucked way into a copse of coniferous trees. It was old, clearly. The stones bore long cracks and the windows were papered over in places. And what was assuredly a stoned-in garden at one point was now overtaken with leafy weeds and burrs. The grass felt wet. Maybe it had just rained.

"The sun is setting," Hirotsu said suddenly. Dazai turned to face him. "The Boss requested you back before tomorrow morning."

Dazai hummed. He tucked the pistol into his belt and began walking towards the house. Hirtosu followed two steps behind, his trail marked by the sound of cracking pine needles and turning stones. "Then let's get a move on," Dazai said.

He'd been at Hogwarts just that morning. He'd been laughing and enjoying the dying lights of his friendships—until next year, that was. But the second he'd sat in that dark limousine. The second Hirotsu had pressed a loaded gun into his hands, it felt as though Dazai had swallowed a rock. It sat heavy in his stomach. Cold. Or hot, like coals. He couldn't unfrown himself.

Work, work, work, he reminded himself. *It isn't supposed to be fun.*

Dazai rapped his knuckle against the door.

Knock, knock, knock. It creaked against his weight, but didn't budge.

Hirotsu and Dazai waited several seconds to no response. "Should've called ahead," Dazai joked, remembering when he'd teased Mori the same way over winter break, but Hirotsu merely blinked down at him.

Dazai shivered with a phantom chill. Mori's coat hugged him back to Earth. He knocked again.

Several seconds passed.

"Coming," a familiar voice called behind the door.

The lock clicked.

The front door opened.

Albus Dumbledore stood in casual, colorful robes. There was a steaming tea in one of his hands, and the doorknob in the other.

"Good evening, Albus," Dazai greeted. He forced some cheer into his voice, but it came out sounding wrong. Hollow and cracked.

Dumbledore stared forward for only a second before collecting himself. But it was a telling second. He was surprised.

"Mr. Dazai," he greeted. Dumbledore's words came out level and friendly, but Dazai knew he was only biding his time. Calculating the demon that stood before him. "And... I'm sorry. I'm afraid we've never met..?"

Hirotsu reached into his pocket for a cigarette. "Hirotsu."

"May we come inside?" Dazai interrupted the pleasantries.

Dumbledore's eyes slid back to him and stayed there. "My dear boy, normally I would offer just that. However," his tea floated back inside the house with a flare of magic, "I suspect you are not here on pleasant terms."

Dazai tilted his head to follow the tea's path across what was, ostensibly, a living room. It landed on a coffee table cluttered with old books. "That's fine. We don't have to go inside. I don't really care."

He held out his hand to shake.

After a moment, Dumbledore returned the gesture. Their shook hands caught in the red evening light.

Hirotsu had to start his lighter four times before a flame finally sparked. He set his cigarette to it until a thin line of smoke trailed out of it. Black smog curled around his face.

"Tell me," Dumbledore was still staring at Dazai, "what has changed that this war's third party should finally decide to show itself so brazenly?"

War.

Third-party.

Dazai drew in a breath and sighed out cigarette smoke.

Dumbledore tried to draw his hand away. Dazai didn't let him. Their hands held in a lock between them. Dumbledore's palm was calloused and wrinkled. Dazai's were small and scarred.

"I guess it can't hurt to tell you," Dazai drawled, looking around the inside of Dumbledore's home tiredly. Did his work ever end? He wondered, distantly, how Draco and Lucius were getting on right now. "But long-winded monologues are for comic book villains, and I'm tired."

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed. "This is no game for children. And the world of magic is no place for Ability Users."

Cigarette smoke made Hirotsu's eyes dark.

"Figured us out, have you?" Dazai hummed.

Magic flared underneath Dazai's palm. Albus was casting wandless magic.

No Longer Human ate it whole.

Greatest Wizard of Our Time didn't amount to much in the face of No Longer Human. Without his magic, Albus was just a frail, old man. Dazai would pity the look of horror on Dumbledore's face if he wasn't growing numb from it all. His blood. His bones. His bile and saliva. Tingling and cold, all of it.

This was the job, after all. This was the color of Mori's coat in dying sunlight.

"You nullified my magic," Dumbledore said, though it seemed mostly to be for himself. Whispered and stark. His eyes widened. "You stole the Philosopher's Stone." His eyes that usually twinkled with amusement or dissected small things were burning with something fierce now. "The Daily Prophet and Department of Education are right to call you a Demon, dear boy."

Dazai's fingers squeezed into Albus' hand. He felt the bones creak underneath him. "Don't be mistaken. Of course I'm the villain here."

He withdrew the gun from his belt. Cocked back the hammer and aimed up.

"But Port Mafia is DOE, and I'm Port Mafia," Dazai watched as Albus' eyes widened further and further. "Good and bad... it's all a farce, you know."

He pulled the trigger.

"I guess that makes me both hero and villain, *huh,* Albus?"

Dumbledore's head exploded in a shower of blood and brain and bone.

It splattered across the door. Something wet slapped across Dazai's face. A second later, mucousy blood slopped off his chin and onto the gun's hilt.

Hirotsu took the gun from him.

The sun set.

"It's dark," Dazai told this to the corpse at his feet. Albus did not answer. And he did not wake. Another name to add to the list of people Dazai had killed. The house was already starting to smell. The stench of blood in the air would be dizzying to anyone who wasn't so familiar with it as Dazai was.

A moment passed. Maybe several moments. Dazai stared at the floor. At how Dumbledore's robes splayed out around him like flower slowly unfurling itself.

"I thought he was supposed to be powerful," Dazai said, apropos of nothing. "He didn't even get close to killing me."

Hirotsu hummed. He nudged Dumbledore's fallen hand back into the confines of his house with the toe of his shoe. "When it comes to magic users, No Longer Human makes you impossible to match," he said simply. He took a long drag from his cigarette then picked it from his lips. He inspected it for a short moment before flicking it away.

The cigarette landed some distance away on a pile of ancient books.

The dry paper ignited immediately. A flash of ember and white. Yellowed paper blackened and curled. Dazai coaxed the blaze along with a burst of magic and it spread hungrily to a blanket, a scroll, a corpse.

The air grew hot.

Within only a few seconds, the fires had grown large enough to engulf the entire entryway. It was searing just to stand nearby. Smoke burst into the air and stuck to Dazai's lungs as black ichor. He coughed dryly. Hacked into his sleeve. A hand settled on his shoulder to drag him away from the blaze.

Dazai blinked up out of a foggy eye.

Everything was drowning in red light. The flickering and laughing of a bursting fire.

Hirotsu pulled Dazai into his side. "Good work. It is time to leave, now. The Boss has been missing you. Let's not keep him waiting."

Dazai choked again.

Suffocating.

After another moment, Dazai and Hirotsu walked back to the limousine and away from dim fires. He hadn't even needed to squint against them, only choked on polluted air. The entire house was burst into flames. All evidence of the murder—of wizarding society's greatest wizard this century—in ashes.

But in the end, everything burned brighter in Yokohama. The blazing death of Albus Dumbledore felt paltry by comparison.

Dazai reached a hand into his coat pocket, and his fingers immediately landed on a coin. By the weight, it was a sickle. And it was warming slowly in the hot air. He rubbed a finger over one side of it, then the other.

Heads and tails.

He made a silent bet, then removed it from the pocket and flipped it high in the air. It spun around, catching light like a flashing fire alarm. Blue. Red. Blue. Red.

Dazai didn't catch the sickle. Let it fall into a trampled patch of overgrown grass. He stepped around it.

Heads or tails. Truth or lie, good or bad, hero or villain. The difference was negligible. These were just two sides of the same coin, after all.

Dazai didn't look back.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaand that's a wrap on year two!! It's so much longer than it needs to be, but I had fun so it's alright lol

On that note! I will Not be continuing M&M into years 3+, as was my original plan. Sorry to anyone who was hoping otherwise, and sorry for abandoning you all with several unresolved plot points because of this (lol). That's my bad. anyway,

Thanks for reading, creating fanworks for my fanwork, and I hope you've enjoyed even just a little bit. Happy birthday!

End Notes

thank you for your patience. Have a lovely day :)

Works inspired by this one

A Series Of Letters by Enj0y_th3_sh0w

I will help you until my hands bleed. (I will fix you until you hate me) by nsicat

Attachment held no place by Djaminion

Boggarts do not lie.. by Djaminion

Sleeping beauty by Djaminion

Magic and Sheeps by ftgrvty

It's only for one day, right? by Djaminion

Valentine's Day Serendipity by ftgrvty

I'd Fight The World For You by The_Morbid_Autumn666

The sheep in wolf's clothing by Djaminion

Father's Bedside by orphan_account

[Restricted Work] by Tsukimi_festival

Yule Ball with Blaise and Dazai by SkylarJade4

Dazai’s Worst Fear by SkylarJade4

Dazai Osamu’s Bad Ending by SkylarJade4

A New Life by SkylarJade4

A Week of Dazai Suffering<3 by realityisweird

Before I cuss you out, what are your pronouns? by InAComa

[Restricted Work] by Sorainhere

Heart to Heart...COMPLETED!! by Rin_is_mentallyunstable

Burning the Candle at Both Ends (A Magic and Mystery/ Coil fic) by Achilles_dictionary

Roommates... by Rin (Rin_is_mentallyunstable)

Just the two of us by SkylarJade4

Make me (think of dying) by Deer_Crispxx_x

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Apologies by Djaminion

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candlelit hallways by vinarchive

Plans and Cuddles by Aqua17

Adoptions and New Lives by Aqua17

Death of a Party Girl (discontinued) by Omariano, seremisuu

Family issues... by Rin (Rin_is_mentallyunstable)

Dazai Osamu is tired by I_LIKE_CROWS

[Restricted Work] by Rosy_Toast

Huddle for warmth by Djaminion

Mafia boss by LOUD333

Hells Hounds in Japan! (Fanfic of coil/magic and mystery) by LOUD333

Ink by FoggedCinder_0

Words by LOUD333

Mafia boss by LOUD333

Double trouble by Rin (Rin_is_mentallyunstable)

Family issues... by Rin (Rin_is_mentallyunstable)

In which Dazai sighs too many times by Bandagelover

Love me I say, love me I say, love me I say, take what you want of me by I_LIKE_CROWS

Whispers of regret by Afanofanythingreally

Cynical One by Omariano, seremisuu

Through The Veil by kira18

I Think I'll Take My Whiskey Neat, My Coffee Black and My Bed at Three. You're too Sweet for Me...(A Magic and Mystery/Coil fic) by Achilles_dictionary

dazai and his group chats // a magic and mystery chatfic by dazamuu

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It takes three words(To Prove Your Love) by SageyWagey

A Bad Day(Which Then Turns Into Multiple Bad Days) by SageyWagey

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I'm stronger than all my men. Except for you by I_LIKE_CROWS

Gods & Dogs by J1N_K0

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Rose Quartz (Magic and Mystery/Coil) by Bee_Is_D1zzy

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Emotions by gmfkahnyat

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